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ROLICKING ADVENTURE!

Imaginative
Tales#2

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TOFFEE TAKES A TRIP

by Charles F. Myers



The Moon—Or Bust!
HOP ON!



Imaginative Tales#2

NOVEMBER 1954

*Life a bit dull? Here's a zippy redhead to
put you in a panic of rollicking merriment!*

Two hilarious TOFFEE novels

by Charles F. Myers

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Chapter 1

G LUMLY, situated in sandy discomfort, Marc Pillsworth watched as another blustering wave tripped, fell flat on its watery face, and embarrassedly dissolved into a foolish fringe of giggling froth. It was the sameness of the thing that was getting him down, the business of being constantly sold short on a promise of something interesting. He rolled carefully over onto his stomach, which had, by now, become a bloody shade of vermillion, and transferred the sunny torture to his back, which had only reached a color, approximately that of tomato soup. Taken either way, front or back, and considering his bright yellow trunks, he was, as the biographers always say, a pretty colorful citizen. Also, as the biographers never say, he was a pretty dejected one.

With one slender finger he traced a circle in the gritty surface before him, then jabbed viciously into its center. There was something frightening, deliberate in the action, especially when it was known that, to Marc, the circle represented the eye of a rascally unknown writer of magazine articles. It seemed only a matter of time before he entered into the refreshing pastime of sticking pins into wax effigies. He didn't

really wish the fellow any harm; only that he'd break his treacherous neck by next Saturday at the latest.

Marc was certain that on the eve of his last earthly day he would be able to point an enfeebled finger squarely at the present day and the three preceding it, and assuredly say, "That was the darkest period of my life." He didn't know which magazine article had planted the hideous idea of separate vacations in Julie's golden head, but he had already sworn violence, bloodshed, and even sudden death of its author if ever he found out. That a man should spend two weeks in a beach house without his wife, was plainly to him, a new and outstanding high in sheerest idiocy. He was only surprised that in a country so nearly glutted with legislation of all descriptions, there should be no laws to protect an unwary husband against the published oozeings of so loathsomely promiscuous a mind as would endorse, and even encourage, the diabolical arrangement of separate vacations.

Ennui was setting like a sort of spiritual rigor mortis. The first day, he had golfed and gotten sunburned, and the second, he had ridden and gotten sunburned, and the third, he had fished and gotten sunburned. Now, in desperation, he was reducing the whole tortuous process to its primary element, and simply getting roasted to a flaming crisp with as little exertion as possible.

WITH eyes that were as optimistic as a slab in the morgue, he gazed up the face of the cliff, beyond the highway running along its edge, and to the beach house on the hill at the other side. It was just as he had supposed. There was no car out front . . . no jaunty blue convertible . . . and more to the point, no Julie. She hadn't changed her mind. He didn't know why he should think she would. It would serve her right, he thought spitefully, if Toffee chose this precise time to make a new entrance into his life.

He folded his hands before him and muzzled his chin into their hollow. He'd been too busy to give Toffee much thought lately, but now that she'd slipped into his consciousness, he found that he recalled her with curiously mixed feelings. Pleasure finally proved to be the strongest, however, and he began to smile for the first time in several days.

Lord knows there was proof enough of Toffee's existence . . . almost too much . . . but still it took an effort to realize that

such a phenomenon could actually be. And Toffee was a phenomenon in every sense of the word . . . even a few that wouldn't bear repeating. With her, it was a matter of "Out of sight, *IN* mind," and vice versa. A creation of Marc's imagination . . . a lovely, vivacious phantom of his dreams . . . she had seen fit on various occasions to materialize from his subconscious and uninvitedly play an active role in his everyday affairs. During the duller stretches of his life, she was apparently content to bide her time in the tranquil valley of his mind, but given a moment of high excitement, she was sure to materialize and gleefully build it into a full fledged crisis with free wheeling.

At first Marc had found it difficult to believe he would ever become accustomed to this peculiar arrangement, but apparently he had, for now, as he thought of Toffee, it was not with awe of the curious circumstance under which she existed, but rather with an almost wistful loneliness for the girl, herself. It was true, he realized, that pandemonium could not be far behind with Toffee on the threshold, but he couldn't help the feeling that his current doldrums could do with a dash of her particular brand of redheaded chaos like a man in a death chamber could do with a shiny new, cross-cut file. It was just as he had come to this decision that alien voices broke through the delicate wall of his quiet, introspective mood, and left it shattered beyond recall.

HIS head darted up, and his hand raked back a disordered shock of hair fallen over his brow. Thus uncovered, his eyes, two charred embers projected through the throbbing sheet of flame that was his face, strained upward, to the top of the cliff, in search of the noisy intruders. Usually no one ever came to this particular beach, except himself, and he had come to think of it as exclusively his own. But if he were preparing to relinquish his solitude to a band of vapid, would-be bathers, he was quite, quite mistaken, for much to the contrary, at the head of the crude board stairway leading down to the tiny beach, there stood two of the most unlikely homo sapiens he had ever seen. They looked like the culls of a dyspeptic nightmare.

The man was short, stocky, mostly bald, and at the moment, extremely animated. But the woman at his side was another matter entirely. Nearly six feet tall, an almost ghostly figure without a trace of color, she was a cruel and unconditional tri-

umph of plainness. Worse than a horse of another color, she was a horse without any color at all. It was hard to believe that blood, rather than water—or perhaps acid—ran in her veins. She was listening intently to what the little man was saying, but there was something clearly argumentative in the inclination of her raw-boned, equine body.

"But I tell you he's done it!" the little man wailed.

"But I tell *you*," the woman trumpeted authoritatively, "It just isn't possible. The old fool couldn't. It won't work!"

"You'll see! You'll see!" the little man piped in a voice that was becoming increasingly mindful of an amusement pier calliope. "He's done it!"

And suddenly turning, he started down the rickety flight of steps as fast as his hammy little legs could carry him. He seemed almost to jitter along them as he sped downward, his bald pate glistening nervously in the bright afternoon sun. The faded woman, apparently still partially unconvinced, hung back for a moment, gazing icily after him. Then suddenly, with a for-better-or worse but I bet it'll be worse shrug of her mammoth shoulders, she decided to follow. Awkwardly, like a runaway beer wagon, she began jolting down the steps, two at a time. The ancient board creaked a feeble threat, but didn't make it good.

Marc, watching this baffling performance with open-faced curiosity, rolled over and boosted himself into an upright position, so as to have a better view of it. Whoever these newcomers were and whatever they had come there for, he was inclined to regard them as a blessing, no matter how shabbily disguised. Anything that happened now was bound to be a relief from the endless monotony of the last few days. After all, the newcomers might be members of some wayward, secret cult, come here for a sort of pagan ritual. It was a good deal to hope for, and hardly likely, but his jaded mind clutched hungrily at the idea.

Now on the beach, the two principal actors in whatever drama was about to be performed, moved swiftly past the rock behind which Marc rested and raced purposefully to the left. This only lent further intrigue to the affair since such a course, if followed to its ultimate end, could only lead them crashing against a further wall of the cliff. And considering the rate at which the pair were traveling, such a collision seemed altogether probable . . . even imminent. Eagerly, Marc jack-knifed forward to keep them in sight.

BUT about half way to the wall, the little man skidded to a disordered stop and pointed a chubby finger toward a large rock that jutted straight and tall from the sands, like a staunch sentinel standing guard. "That one'll do," he shrilled, and to Marc's bitter disappointment, disappeared behind the boulder's shielding bulk. The woman, still reluctant, paused at the rock's edge.

"It won't work," she insisted. But her voice had now lost some of its authority. She followed her companion into the obscurity behind the rock.

Marc would have given his immortal soul, along with his only copy of Forever Amber, to have known what it was that was not going to work behind that boulder. He felt meanly cheated. He felt that the intruders, like the waves, had led him to expect great things, then deliberately let him down. For a moment he knew what it was to be a trusting chorus girl who had been promised jewels, only to find, by the morning's depressing light, that she had received only a hangover and a pair of cheap stockings. He knew what it was to—

Then, suddenly, he only knew panic as a tremendous explosion grasped the little beach and shook it like a limp dishrag. Rocks, dislodged from the face of the cliff, began to fall everywhere through churning, sand-laden air. Marc wasn't bored any more. He clutched the rock at his side with all the zeal of an impassioned suitor back home after a three-year absence on a desert island. His attitude clearly intimated that he loved that rock dearly and nothing would ever part him from it. Something that was not a rock landed thuddingly at his side, but he was too distracted to notice.

"Earthquake!" he gasped.

"Earthquake, my left eye!" a voice grunted thickly. And Marc's head snapped about to find the ghostly woman looking up at him with startled eyes. She had exchanged locations with amazing rapidity. Lying on her stomach, arms, legs, and hair in a distressing state of disarray, she looked like nothing so much as a bloodless witch who had suffered a rather devastating crash landing. Certainly, she had descended as from the heavens, and yet, one glance told you that her association was certainly not with things astral. With stunning directness, she parted bluish lips and spat an impossible quantity of sand onto the beach where it looked much more natural.

Marc shrank back suspiciously. Perhaps it wasn't the gallant

thing to do, but it seemed prudent. "What . . . what happened?" he asked timidly.

"How should I know?" the woman asked bitterly, beginning an unconcerned inventory of her various parts. "I was too busy getting away from it to notice." Then, pummeling an embarrassingly intimate region with vigorous enthusiasm, she seemed to come to the comforting conclusion that she had passed through her ordeal, still in possession of all she had started out with. Just why this should mean anything to her, Marc could not fathom. It seemed to him that any change, willy-nilly, could hardly miss being an improvement. No matter what ever happened to the woman, it could never be any worse than the awful trouncing that nature had already given her. She got stiffly to her feet and peered cautiously over the rock.

"Holy mother!" she breathed. "They're gone like a maiden's illusions!"

"What?" Marc asked. "What's gone?"

"The Rock," the woman replied with dismaying heartiness, "and Mr. Epperson. He's gone too." Obviously, these missing items had been listed in the order of their importance.

"You . . . you mean the little fellow? He's dead?" Marc asked shakily.

Exceptionally so, I should say," the woman replied almost gleefully. "Look for yourself."

MARC accepted the invitation reluctantly, and peered around the edge of the rock with eyes that were only partly open. Then he gasped with amazement. It wasn't that there was so much to see, but rather that there was so little. Certainly, there was no sign of the rock or the little man. In the spot where they should have been, however, there was a deep hole in the sand that looked much like the work of a sizeable dredger. Around this, there seemed to linger a sort of undefined gaseous body.

"Where . . . where is he . . . the little man, I mean!" he asked hesitantly.

"I told you," the woman replied impatiently. "He's gone."

"But his . . . his remains? Where are they?"

"Vaporized, most likely," the woman answered airily, as though explaining a self-evident mathematical rule to a not-too-bright child.

"Vaporized?" The word seemed meaningless when applied

to human bodies.

"Certainly. Those gases you see out there are all that's left of him."

Marc stared at the illusive last remains of Mr. Epperson, and shuddered.

"A noisy way to go," the woman reflected philosophically, "but nice and clean." She seemed to be speaking of an experiment that had turned out with surprising success. "He was a dirty little pest anyway. I never did like having him around." She smiled and it was no improvement. "I'll bet it's the first time anyone's ever gone to heaven with a rock . . . if he went there at all."

"What happened to him? What did it?"

The woman regarded Marc thoughtfully for a time and seemed to come to a decision. She reached into the pocket of her grimy skirt and drew forth a minute, white capsule. She held it out for his inspection. "She that?" she asked.

"Just barely," Marc answered truthfully. "It's awfully small."

"And awfully powerful," the woman went on with dramatic emphasis. "That's what did it. Anyway, it was one just like that."

"What is it? What's it made of?"

"I don't know for sure," the woman replied.

"But that's impossible!" Marc protested.

"I know it," the woman said flatly. "It's as impossible as a three dollar bill. But it works, just the same. Look what it did to old Eppy!"

Marc winced. "Where did you get those things?" he asked.

"They're the brain child of a certain Dr. Herrigg," the woman replied. "I always thought there was something offside about the old crow, and now that I know it, I'm going . . ."

Suddenly, she was interrupted by a nasty cracking sound, and Marc quickly took up his old courtship with the rock, lest it be the overture to another explosion. He sensed, rather than saw or heard, the woman dropping to his side.

"What was that?" he whispered. Then he turned to the woman and started back in horror. She was lying face-down in the sand and the hole at the base of her skull was clearly visible. The matter of the fluid running in her veins was settled beyond all argument; it was blood.



Chapter 2

BLINDLY following a first impulse, Marc leaped to his feet to see where the shot had come from. He regretted it almost instantly. No sooner had he gotten on eye level with the top of the rock, then there was a second cracking sound and a bullet whined viciously past his ear, like a great, lethal gnat. He hugged the rock again, wondering incongruously if he were to spend the rest of his life in a crouching position. It seemed such a vulgar position in which to die. In the brief moment of his exposure, he had seen a small grey-haired figure, with a pointed, sharp-featured face, and a gun to match. The sight had done much to shake Marc's confidence in his own future. Indeed, he imagined that this, approximately, was what the mystery writers were referring to when they mentioned a "tight spot." And the sound of footsteps descending the stairway convinced him that his own personal spot was swiftly becoming downright constricting. His eyes, wide and wild, frantically ran the length of the beach.

There was only one choice, and it was a dismally unknown quantity. Cut off from the stairway, he would have to crawl along the base of the bluff in the opposite direction, keeping

down behind the covering rocks as well as he could. He wasn't sure just where such a path might lead, but it held one feature that appealed to him overwhelmingly; it would at least put a distance between himself and the man with the gun, who's deadly acquaintance he was reticent to make.

By the time Marc had come to the end . . . the dead end . . . of his tortuous path, his knees, with a trim of parsley would easily have made an attractive addition to even the best butcher's display. Still crouching, he drew himself stiffly up, and sat down on a flat rock to inspect his damaged joints. Finally satisfied that they had not been worn all the way through, no matter how much they felt like it, he gave his attention over to the situation at hand. It looked hopeless.

To his left and in front of him, there was nothing but ocean; to his right, a grey-haired killer, and directly behind him, the sheer, stoney face of the cliff. There was nothing to do but hope for the best . . . in spite of an insistent feeling that the best would be none to good. He picked up a loose stone and regarded it bleakly. Compared to the gun he'd glimpsed on the beach, it looked loathsomely harmless.

MARC couldn't have said exactly how long he'd been sitting there, looking like an unhappy throw-back to the stone age, but the afternoon light had already begun to fade from the sky, and the rock in his hand had become heavy. He guessed it was about an hour. Why hadn't the man followed him? He gazed toward the darkening sea, and fished vainly for some meaning, some key, to the afternoon's events. In them there had been surprise and danger, but over it all, there had also been the discoloring shadow of unreality. He began to wonder if it hadn't all been just a delusion born of over-exposure to the sun. After all, during the summer months, fried brains weren't the exclusive property of the local restaurant owner. They were anybody's just for the basking.

Somewhat bolstered by this possibility, but still wary, Marc stood up and peered apprehensively over the shielding barrier of rocks. There was no sound, no movement, anywhere. Hesitantly, still crouching, but not on his hands and knees this time, he started back. In spite of a halting, stop-and-go progress, it was only a matter of five minutes before he was back on the beach proper. Just before he reached the point where he had abandoned the body of the nameless woman, he stopped again,

longer this time. Finally, like a man about to plunge into a pool of iced water, he sucked in his breath and stepped resolutely around the side of the rock. Then he stopped short. The body was gone.

When he'd recovered sufficiently from this surprise, he gazed uneasily over the top of the rock to the main part of the beach. It was utterly deserted. Outside of the still missing stone, it was just as he had first seen it that day. He shrugged and started toward the stairway. Sun-stroke or whatever, forces had obviously been at work that were hopelessly beyond his comprehension.

He climbed the complaining stairs, crossed the deserted road, and made his way up the path to the beach house.

For a moment, as he looked at the small, streamlined dwelling, his earlier mode of loneliness was sharply recalled to him. It was a place meant for parties and gaiety and carefree companionship. Without these things, it seemed rejected and forlorn; like a lovely, giddy girl dressed for a ball and left waiting by a heartlessly indifferent beau. He forced the feeling aside and hurried on.

Finding the door open, just as he had left it, he stepped inside and started to close it against the growing chill of the evening. His hand started forward, then froze in mid-air. Behind him, in the dimness of the tiny reception hall, he'd heard a faint rustling sound, and swung quickly about. But not soon enough. Instantly, something cold, hard, and as decisive as a tombstone, struck him across the side of the head. The room began to spin deliriously.

'Round and 'round the little room traveled, until it had become nothing more than a dizzy, churning whirlpool. For a moment Marc teetered precariously on its brink, then suddenly caught in its expanding tide, lost his footing and plunged downward.

Spiraling helplessly toward the center of the whirling, fluid cylinder, he could see that its center was dark, and he was frightened. He tried to fight the dragging current, but it was no use. Next, he was caught in that darkness, and was spinning dizzily downward, faster and faster, like a great, human pin-wheel.

Marc had lost all sense of time before his frantic journey was ended. It might have lasted a split second or an hour. He didn't know. But when it was over, he was grateful. Landing

flat on his stomach, he lay perfectly still for a time, his eyes closed. Curiously, now that he had come to rest, a strange feeling of contentment was slowly creeping over him. He didn't know where he was, but he was glad to be there.

TURNING slowly over, swinging his long legs before him he opened his eyes and gazed about. At first he was blinded by a bright light that seemed to come from everywhere. A bit at a time, however, his surroundings began to swim into view. He discovered, piece-meal, that he was in an immense room; apparently some sort of filing room, for the walls, on every side, were lined to a distant ceiling with business-like filing cabinets. Against the opposite wall stood a metal ladder that was fastened at its base to a track that stretched evenly around the room. He still couldn't discover where the light was coming from, but it was bluish and very bright.

"Hello," a voice said softly above him, and Marc, glancing up, thought it sounded vaguely familiar. He was right. Perched on the uppermost rung of the ladder, and dangling a pair of scandalously perfect legs, sat Toffee. Clothed, as always before, only in a scrap of transparent emerald colored material, her figure was being shockingly frank about its own perfection. It seemed almost conceited in its exciting loveliness. She smiled roguishly and her green eyes sparkled through the distance. There was a quick flash of red hair as she swung about and started down the ladder.

"You would come just when I'm busiest," she scolded happily, swinging easily from step to step. "I should have known it. When could I ever expect any consideration from the likes of you?"

Rather than enter into any preposterous argument with his own senses, Marc admitted that she was actually there, before him. He knew by now that he would have to sooner or later, anyway. "Busy?" he asked with as matter-of-fact a voice as he could manage. "Busy with what?"

"Your files, of course," Toffee replied lightly, jumping with kittenish softness to the floor, disdainful of the last three steps. "This is the end of the year for you, mentally."

"What files?"

"Didn't you see the sign when you came in?"

"The way I came in," Marc replied sourly, "I didn't see anything."

"Oh, of course not," Toffee agreed. "Just looking down that way and seeing you here all of a sudden, I forgot for a moment that you were from outside. Well, just so you'll know, this is the Miscellaneous Information chamber of your mind. You've never been here before. You've only seen the valley of your mind." She smiled demurely. "I guess you're just naturally drawn to wherever I happen to be. But I do wish you'd seen the sign. It's an idea I got from outside, in your world. It's all lit up with mental impulses. . . . just like neon. It's really beautiful."

Marc winced. That his mind might some day become a mental replica of Broadway was the most repulsive idea he'd had to face in weeks. Toffee would be setting up a chain of "Grey Matter" hot dog stands next. "Miscellaneous Information?" he asked uncertainly.

"Yes," Toffee said, with the professional air of a paid guide giving a fifty cent tour. "In a year's time, you pick up more odd facts and figures than you think. If they were left lying around, your mind would look like a city dump. So at the end of every fiscal year, it's my job to gather them all together and file them alphabetically under topic headings. Then, it's always here when you need it, unless it's too out of date. See what I mean?"

Marc nodded slowly. "I guess so," he said, and his voice was laden with uncertainty. "But don't you think it's a little creepy?"

"Nonsense!" Toffee cried, dismissing the idea. Then her smile suddenly faded and her eyes became hard. "And while we're on the subject," she said menacingly, "there's something I'd like to ask you."

"What's that?"

TURNING to a small table nearby, she picked up a stiff white card, and flipped it angrily under his nose. "Just you tell me," she demanded hotly, "How you happened to pick up the bust measurements of the entire Gaities chorus!"

Marc's expression was one of utter stupefaction for a moment, then it relaxed. "Oh, that!" he exclaimed with false heartiness.

"Yes, that!" Toffee echoed ruthlessly, placing one hand on a smooth hip.

"That's easy to explain," Marc went on quickly. "It all had to do with the advertising agency. We handled some ads

for the Gaities."

"Ads?" Toffee sneered. "You mean they advertise things like *that!*"

"Well, no. Not exactly. It was really the show that we advertised."

"What a show it must be!" Toffee exclaimed sarcastically. "That Miss Flare La Greer must be a fair sensation every time she sets foot on a run-way. With measurements like that, I wonder that there's any room left for the rest of them."

"Don't be vulgar," Marc put in without hope.

"If you ask me," Toffee said icily, "It's the La Greer moll that's being vulgar. She was born vulgar." Then her smile suddenly appeared as unexpectedly as a sunburst in the middle of a rain storm. "But if it's the way you say," she cooed, "I guess I'll just have to forgive you. Now let's say hello properly." She stretched her arms out toward Marc, and made quick, beckoning motions with her hands.

Marc was instantly on his feet. Of all the censorable things in the world, experience had taught him that Toffee's interpretation of a proper greeting would probably head the list. "Get away from me!" he yelped, backing into a filing case. "Stay mad! Hate me! Don't start that old stuff, or I'll . . ."

"Or you'll what?" Toffee asked wickedly, sliding her slender arms smoothly around his neck.

It may have been Toffee's kiss that started the room spinning. Marc didn't know, and somehow, try as he would, he couldn't seem to make himself care. At any rate, it *was* spinning, and gaining speed at every turn. In a moment, it was whirling like a thing possessed, and Marc could feel himself being lifted easily upward. He opened his eyes and looked out with dismay. It was as though they had been caught in the very center of a gigantic tornado. Caught, just as he had been in the whirlpool only a moment before.

"Wow!" Toffee cried gleefully, her arms clasped tenaciously about his neck. "What a kiss!"

MARC groaned and rolled over. Then, lest it fall off, he clutched his head in his hands, and sat up. Instantly, he experienced a feeling that was like having several gross of heavy-duty ice picks driven into the base of the skull, just behind the left ear. He groaned again and tried to guess where he might be, but his mind, still in a state of churning confusion,

would not be prodded into an answer. It was as limp and uninterested as an old, worn glove. He reached a cautious hand into the blackness, and then quickly shrank back.

The touch of soft, cool flesh was not precisely what he had expected. Neither was he expecting the slap that was soundly administered across the bridge of his nose only a split second later.

"And don't tell me you were just looking for a match, either!" an irate feminine voice rasped. "I'll teach you to come pawing around me!"

"Toffee!"

"Marc!"

Immediately, two slender arms were about his neck, and Toffee was contritely saying, "I'm sorry Marc. I didn't know it was you. It didn't feel like you."

"How should you know how I feel?" Marc asked annoyedly, trying to disentangle himself from her insistent embrace. "Do you always have to say a thing so it sounds lecherous? Where did you come from, anyway?"

"I've materialized from your mind again," Toffee replied gaily, happy at the achievement. "You submerged into your subconscious and dreamed me up a moment ago, so naturally I just dropped everything and returned to consciousness with you. What kind of a mess have you gotten into this time?"

"Holy smoke!" Marc cried, suddenly remembering the day's odd adventures. "You're right. Things are plenty wrong. I was ambushed!"

"Oh, no!" Toffee cried. "How terrible! You're so young!"

"I was hit over the head," Marc added flatly.

"Oh," Toffee breathed with relief "Where are we?"

Marc had already gotten to his feet and was fumbling along the wall. "I'm on vacation," he said through a dark distance. "We're at the beach house."

"Where's Julie?" Toffee asked with a tinge of apprehension, remembering that Julie, on other occasions, hadn't been precisely cordial.

"She's visiting her mother at the farm," Marc replied shortly. "She read an article about separate vacations."

"Craziest thing I ever heard," Toffee pronounced bluntly. "What are you doing, sanding that wall?"

"I'm looking for the light switch," Marc explained. "It's right by the stairway closet as I remember."



Chapter 3

HIS hand, running out of wall, began fishing absently about in a narrow open space. "I think I've found the closet," he called reassuringly. Then, strangely, he was aware that the space had begun to widen, almost automatically it seemed. He guessed that the door was swinging open of its own volition, and attributed the phenomenon to faulty construction. He made a mental note to check the door in the morning. But what happened a second later could hardly have been explained by structural discrepancies. With truly alarming ferocity, two unidentified arms were flung about his waist, and caught off guard, he was carried crashingly to the floor. The darkness became alive with the sounds of conflict.

"Cut it out, Toffee!" Marc yelled, struggling wildly to free himself and getting hopelessly entangled. "Try to restrain yourself! This is no time for playing games!"

"I'm perfectly restrained," Toffee called back suspiciously. "And who's playing games . . . and what kind of games? I'm just waiting for the lights."

"Then who's this on top of me?" Marc wailed, cagily fighting his way into a position that left him completely impotent

against his unseen attacker.

"Why don't you ask him?" Toffee suggested helpfully through a jumble of scuffling, gasping sounds. "I'm sure I don't know." Swiftly, she started in search of the illusive light switch herself.

"I don't think she's interested in formal introductions," Marc wheezed with what sounded like a dying gasp. "Hurry and get those lights on before he kills me. He's strangling me!"

As though in instant answer to his command, the room suddenly blazed with light, and Marc, seeing his assailant, almost nose to nose, turned deathly pale. His eyes snapped lightly shut, and turning his head to one side, his lips began to move feverishly, although his voice seemed to have deserted him. On his chest, face down, and in an immodest state of disorder, lay the lifeless figure of the woman on the beach.

Toffee gazed wrathfully on this grotesque display, and the usual hand moved threateningly to the usual hip. "Well, you might at least have the decency to stop whispering to her!" she hissed contemptuously. "The lights are on, you know! I can see you! I'm not blind!" She paused for a moment, and seeing no change in the distressing tableau, went on. "Tell that shameless wench to get up and get out of here! You never miss a chance, do you? The minute the lights go out, you've got to be frisking on the carpet!"

With a tremendous effort, Marc partly opened one eye and looked pleadingly up at her. He managed to force out a few wretched words. "She's . . . she's not a . . . a shameless wench," he whispered half-hysterically. "She's . . . she's a . . . a . . . a body!"

"I can see that for myself!" Toffee retorted hotly "And not such a hot one, either, if you ask me. Now, tell her to gather up her flabby old body and drag it out that door, before I practice violence on it. Don't just lie there staring at me like a wall-eyed clam!"

"But . . . but she can't!"

"Sodden drunk, eh?"

"No. She . . . she's a dead body." Marc's voice suddenly broke through its bonds and came back with unexpected force. "She's been shot!" he roared. "Get her off me before I lose my mind!"

The angry fire of suspicion flickered one last time in Toffee's eyes, then went out. She leaned down for a better look at

the smothering figure. "How sinister!" she breathed.

"Don't waste time on adjectives!" Marc entreated. "Just get the horrible thing off me!"

TOFFEE forced a slender hand to the woman's shoulder, and with an incongruously dainty gesture rolled it from the distraught Marc. "It makes my spine fairly tingle," she said.

"What do think it's done to mine?" Marc asked reproachfully, getting to his feet and rubbing the injured section.

Toffee continued to stare at the discarded body. "I do think you could have shown better taste in your choice of victims," she mused. "It couldn't have been a crime of passion, or passion isn't everything I've heard it is." Having satisfied herself on this point, she turned brightly to Marc. "Why did you shoot her?" she asked with honest curiosity.

"I didn't shoot her," Marc denied stoutly. "I only saw it done . . . down on the beach."

"Then what's that gun doing here?" Toffee asked, pointing to the corner.

Marc forced himself to pick up the revolver. It looked like the one he'd seen on the beach. Obviously, whoever had hit him, hadn't meant to kill him. It would have been so much easier to have shot him. "Someone's trying to frame me," he said, as though trying to explain this fact to himself.

"I don't blame them," was Toffee's prompt reply "You're quite a picture in those yellow trunks. They set your sunburn off like a keg of dynamite."

"But what am I going to do with that body?" Marc asked, ignoring the irrelevant criticism. "If it's found here, they'll lock me up forever."

Toffee thoughtfully chewed a thumbnail. "You might try giving it to someone," she said pensively. "There must be just lots of people who are simply dying to have a body all their own. A person with an ingenuity at all could probably find all kinds of uses for it."

"Stop driveling," Marc broke in curtly. "And try to think of something useful. I'll try to get it back into the closet, then I'll have to change clothes. We'll decide what to do with it afterwards."

"You asked me," Toffee reminded him. "I don't suppose the woman really cares much what you do with her body. After all,

she hasn't much use for it anymore. And it wasn't really such a good one to begin with. I'm sure I wouldn't care what people did with mine."

"You never did," Marc snapped, and summoning the courage born of necessity, he lifted the figure reluctantly to his shoulder. "You have no modesty. And please don't go on like that about bodies. It's indecent."

"It's no more indecent than you in those trunks," Toffee retorted.

Marc propped the body in the closet and quickly closed the door.

"With legs like yours," Toffee went on, "I wouldn't even take a bath for consideration of the poor peeping Toms, much less go out on the beach where innocent women and children might see the things. They're horrible."

Marc had ignored the insult as long as he could. "What's wrong with my legs?" He asked woundedly.

"They're skinny," Toffee said, carefully taking stock, "and hairy. They look like a pair of twisted pipe cleaners . . . dirty pipe cleaners . . . they also turn the stomach and wither the soul."

"That's enough," Marc yelled, reddening. "Hereafter I'll thank you to leave my pipe clean . . . my legs out of this. Just try to forget that I even have legs at all."

"Gladly," was the obliging reply. "I'll just pretend to myself that you're staggering around on hooks."

Blanching, Marc strove to restore his sense of dignity. He drew himself up to his full height, some six feet, two inches, and started regally up the stairs. With the gun still in hand, he looked like a noble suicider. "I'll return," he said frigidly, "after I've put on some trousers." Then he stopped and regarded Toffee's transparent tunic with slow deliberation. "And while we're on the subject," he added quietly. "You might just try to do something about your own nakedness. It's revolting!"

MARC pulled on a discreetly colorful sport jacket and glanced at himself in the mirror. With the exception of a worried expression, everything he wore was in neat, conservative good taste. He sighed, left the room.

Downstairs, he crossed the reception hall, careful to give the closet a wide berth, and made his way into the darkened

living room. He felt his way to a floor lamp and turned it on. Immediately, a bright circle of light spread over the thick carpet like ink through a blotter. Noting this common phenomenon without interest, he turned away, then stopped as the door at the opposite end of the room opened. Toffee, replendent in a cunning arrangement of the dining room drapes, moved sinuously into the room with all the unconscious grace of a stalking panther.

The drapes, a bold flowery design on a background of white, had been fashioned into a bare midriff evening gown of truly provocative design. The two parts, obviously disdainful of each other, contrived to leave a maximum of midriff, while doing little or nothing toward covering their assigned portions. The skirt was widely split at one side, exposing an exquisite leg, like a diamond in a show case. Toffee's nod to decency had been most perfunctory indeed.

"Like it?" she asked, smiling radiantly. "You'd never dream that it used to cover windows, would you?"

"I'd never dream it ever covered anything," Marc replied amazedly. "And if it ever had any ambitions along those lines,





they're certainly shot now."

"It was just an idea that I had," Toffee replied proudly.

"In night clubs all over the country," Marc commented dryly. "Thousands of girls have that same idea three times nightly, only they get paid for their nakedness . . . or hauled into night court by the decency squad."

Fortunately, any further discussion of Toffee's "creation" was suddenly forestalled by the unexpected sound, from outside, of tires leaving pavement and turning grindingly onto gravel. Marc and Toffee ran swiftly to the window, where they vied athletically for a view of the drive; each for his own separate reason. Marc was having nightmarish visions of Julie, returned with a changed mind to share the remainder of his vacation. Toffee only knew that any addition, at this moment, was bound to be an interesting one.

"It's a man!" she breathed happily.

"Thank heaven," Marc sighed relievedly, then on second thought added, "Good grief!"

An instant later, a knock sounded at the front door and Toffee started eagerly toward the hall. "I'll let him in," she said over her shoulder.

"Don't!" cried Marc. "What about the thing in the closet?"

"Oh, that!" Toffee cried back airily. "We'll have him hang his hat on a lamp or something." She continued toward the door.

"Stop!" Marc yelled commandingly. And Toffee opened the door.

A LANKY rustic, replete with drooping mustache and high heeled boots gazed unbelievably at the dreamlike creature that had opened the door to him. And a great, wistful sadness came into his eyes. "I'm Morton Miller," he drawled with a voice that so perfectly completed the homespun picture it was hard to believe he hadn't arrived by stage coach.

"It could be worse," Toffee consoled, obviously in a serious doubt of her own statement.

"I'm the sheriff," the fellow elaborated.

Marc and Toffee exchanged a glance that was a silent, two-way scream.

"You got a body, lady?"

"You ought to know," Toffee replied, snatching furtively after her retreating composure. "You've hardly taken your eyes off it."

The sheriff cleared his throat and his voice dug its toe awkwardly in a hay stack. "No lady," he said nervously. "That ain't what I mean. 'I'm lookin' fer a dead body.'"

"We don't have any," Toffee lied promptly, as though speaking of termites.

"That's funny," the sheriff mused chattily, now on firmer ground. "A fella called me on the phone and said a woman had been shot out here."

Marc swiftly joined them. He knew that the wheels of calamity had inexorably begun to turn. He could almost hear them grinding.

"What fellow?" Toffee was asking.

"Don't rightfully know. Wouldn't give his name. Had a sort of whiney voice, as I recollect. Sounded kinda goofy."

"He was goofy," Marc put in flatly. "Goofy as they come. No one's been shot here yet." Then starting toward the door, he added, "Goodnight."

"Just a minute," the sheriff said, placing a mammoth foot firmly on the doorsill. "I gotta look around. It's my duty." He eyed Marc suspiciously "And just who are you?"

"I'm Marc Pillsworth," Marc said almost ashamedly. "This is my place."

The sheriff nodded, pushed the door open, and stepped authoritatively inside. Obviously, this was one arm of the law that had a well developed muscle, if not much else. "Always like to have the owner around, when I'm ransackin' fer a body," he said cryptically. "Usually find that's the bird that hid 'er there."

"You're making a mistake," Toffee objected weakly.

"Maybe," the sheriff replied composedly. Then he pointed to the closet. "First things first," he said with threadbare philosophy. "What's in there?"

"Nothing," Toffee replied with desperate casualness.

"It's pretty dark in there," the sheriff complained. "Ain't there a light?"

Toffee nodded. "It's loose," she explained. "I couldn't reach it to tighten it. But I'll bet you can. You're so tall, and all." She pointed to one of the closet's darkest corners. "It's back there."

The sheriff, a determined man if anything, followed the suggestion blindly, and moved into the inner darkness of the tiny compartment. Never had a man looked so much like a lamb going trustingly to slaughter.



Chapter 4

IT happened just as Toffee had hoped it would. No sooner was the sheriff in the closet than she slammed the door and turned the key standing ready in its lock. It may even be that she closed the door a bit before the sheriff was fully inside, for there had been an undignified slapping sound that implied as much. Either way, however, the deed done, she turned breathlessly to Marc.

"Let's get out of here!" she cried. "You've been framed like a museum masterpiece." blankly.

Marc, too stunned to quite grasp the situation stared at her

"What did you do with the gun?" Toffee went on.

"It's upstairs on my bed," he murmured, gazing unbelievably at the closet door.

The atmosphere within the closet was swiftly becoming agitated. A series of formidable thudding sounds was suddenly followed by a shriek that sounded like a fast freight going through a rural junction at midnight.

"I think the sheriff's found the body," Toffee commented dryly. "Well, it's what he was after, and he can't say we didn't

do our best to help him. Let's get out of here. If he keeps that up, he'll wake up the dead."

To Marc, the remark seemed singularly ill-timed. Shudderingly, as he followed Toffee out the door, he tried not to think of the grim goings-on inside the darkened closet.

THE car swerved crazily, missed the oncoming truck by a sickeningly narrow margin, and sped on down the highway, followed by a shower of rare and salty expletives, recited with great sincerity by a truck driver who was undisputedly a master of spicy invective.

"I thought you knew how to drive," Marc moaned, moving his hands slowly away from his eyes.

"There's nothing to it," Toffee bragged, pressing the accelerator to the floor.

"There certainly isn't, the way you do it," Marc replied coldly. "You just step on the starter and, zoom!, before you know it, you're resting quietly in the morgue. It's a dandy arrangement if you have a passion for morgues. It just happens that I haven't."

"Nonsense!" Toffee cried. "You worry too much. A child could do it!"

"I'd rather a child did," Marc sighed defeatedly. "I'd feel safer."

"Watch this!" Toffee cried happily. And she started swinging the wheel recklessly from side to side so that the car careened deliriously back and forth, across the road. "There's no end to the fun you can have in a car!"

"Oh, yes there is!" Marc cried, clinging desperately to the door handle. "And ours should take place within the next ten seconds, if I'm any judge!"

"You're so morbid minded," Toffee complained.

Then, at the last possible moment, she swung the car sharply into a side road, and the evening stillness was hastily dispatched to the realm of memory by a shrieking protest from the tortured tires.

"Holy smoke!" yelled Marc. "If the sheriff isn't after us by now, the highway patrol must be."

Toffee didn't answer. She was too busy regaining a last foothold on the accelerator. Marc noted with relief that the new road was deserted. At least she couldn't kill any innocent bystander here. There was still a chance that manslaughter wouldn't

be added to the list of their crimes.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"How should I know?" Toffee replied toughly, from the side of her mouth. "Where *do* people go when they're making a getaway?"

"You don't have to talk like a gun moll," Marc admonished, and suddenly he was overcome with the helplessness of the situation. It seemed that fate had gone out of its way to find new confusions for complicating his life. If things had been too monotonously simple a few hours before, now they were too hecticly complex. They had gone far beyond his capacity for such things. Through it all, Marc was wishing that Julie were there to console and advise him, as she had so often in the past. It was only a matter of a moment before he was lost deep in a reverie in which only the stillness of the night, his wife and himself existed. The car began to lose its speed.

"Stop that!" Toffee's voice said with unnatural faintness. "You're making me fade!"

"Huh?" Marc turned toward her, and his eyes widened with alarm. Toffee was almost transparent.

"You were day dreaming again, weren't you?" she accused, becoming more visible. "I've warned you about that before. I can't exist unless I'm projected through your full consciousness. Now stay awake unless you want to be wrecked."

"I'm sorry," Marc said, relieved that she had already become almost completely materialized once more. But Toffee, obviously concerned with other matters, seemed to forget the incident instantly.

"I think we're being followed," she said gravely.

"What!"

"A car turned off the highway just after we did, and has been gaining on us ever since. I've been watching it in the mirror."

MARC shifted quickly in the seat, and thrusting his head out the window, peered into the darkness, behind. Two headlights, like the eyes of a nightmare demon, stared malevolently back at him, and crept closer.

"Step on it!" he yelled. "It's probably the sheriff!" Then, suddenly, like a turtle retreating into the safety of its shell, he jerked his head back inside as a shot rang out through the still night.

"He's shooting at us!" he cried.

"Don't you think I know it?" Toffee moaned, bending low over the wheel. Then she screamed as another barking sound announced a second shot. The car began to skid drunkenly sideways.

"They've hit a tire!" she screamed. "We're out of control!"

Instantly the darkness was filled with scraping, rending sounds as the car swung crazily along the road, fell into a shallow ravine, and imbedded itself, nose-first, in the opposite embankment.

Following the musical aftermath of glass and metal showered on the pavement, the ensuing stillness inside the car was almost deafening. Then, Toffee, dropping a broken steering gear daintily out of the window, turned to Marc.

"Are you all right?"

"I think so," Marc replied, without a trace of conviction.

"I don't think your car will go any more," Toffee said regretfully. "We'd better make a run for it. You'll have to get out first. My door is jammed."

Simultaneously, as though repeating a well rehearsed routine, they turned toward the door at Marc's side, then froze. Framed in the window, neither the gun nor the hand that held it looked in the least way friendly.

"I . . . I can explain everything, Sheriff," Marc stammered.

"You won't have to explain a thing," a strange voice said softly, and the hand and the gun were disconcertingly joined by the pointed, sharp-featured face that Marc had seen on the beach. "All you have to do is get out and follow my instructions as I give them. It's very simple."

The face disappeared and the gun waved them out of the car.

"What?" . . . " Marc began.

"We'll talk later," the man broke in. "Right now, I'll have to ask you to blindfold each other."

His hand held out two crude, white bandages.

"Gee," Toffee giggled delightedly, accepting one of the strips. "It's just a game, isn't it?"

Marc's answering glance effortlessly hurdled years of scientific research and rendered the death ray hopelessly obsolete. His emotions, translated into words, would have required a brief but highly specialized vocabulary which he did not possess.

"You may remove your blindfolds now," the man said, and Marc and Toffee lost no time in doing so. For a moment both of them stood gaping incredulously at their new surroundings. They were standing in the center of an enormous dome-shaped room that seemed to be walled entirely with highly polished, unbroken rock; as though a small mountain had somehow been hollowed out. Except for two curved, slit-like doorways, the monotonous smoothness went endlessly on like perpetual motion. One door was directly before them; the other, through which they had obviously come, directly behind. Both were closed with a knobless, metallic panel. A few bits of austere, metal furniture stood here and there, looking lost in the vastness of the place. But the most unusual particular of the room was the way in which it was lighted. High in its ceiling, a fiery, sun-like ball revolved lazily, impossibly held aloft by what appeared to be two rays of strong, white light. The resulting brightness was like that one might expect to find in an unshaded meadow at high noon. Marc glanced at the contrivance and turned away blinking. It was too bright for steady scrutiny.

"You like my place?" the man asked, and his voice was the kind that crept up from behind and tapped you quietly on the shoulder. Listening to him, Marc wondered absently why Hollywood should bother with men like Peter Lorre when there were others, like the grey-haired little man, around.

TOFFEE, however, was not so much interested in voices as what they were saying, gave the room a second appraising glance. "I don't think it's so screaming wonderful," she said with sledge hammer bluntness. "It might make a pretty fair dance hall, though if you'd just tone down that silly light fixture up there."

The prideful glint in the little man's eyes went cold to be supplanted by the colorless ash of disappointment. Obviously, he had expected this to be an impressive moment.

"This," he said with battered dignity, "is a citadel of science."

"This," Toffee corrected ruthlessly, "is as nutty as a peanut stand at a county fair."

"And yet, there may be things here that will interest you intensely."

Toffee turned briefly to Marc. "I don't like the way he said that."

Apparently, the statement hadn't struck just the right note with Marc, either. He'd already turned to the little man. "Now look here, Dr. Herrigg . . .

"Miss Logan told you my name?"

"Miss Logan?"

"The deceased Miss Logan," the doctor elaborated.

" . . . Whose body was planted in my closet," Marc completed angrily.

"That was a shame," the doctor sighed. "I'm truly sorry about all that; but it did seem the only thing to do at the time. I couldn't find you on the beach, so I had to make some hasty readjustments. You had to be gotten out of the way, and the woman's body had to be disposed of. What could be better than turning the whole problem over to the police? It all dovetailed beautifully. After all, I have a very good reason for not wanting the police curious about my whereabouts."

"Just off hand," Marc said sourly, "I can't think of a better reason than murder. They're so apt to be high-handed about the thing."

"Exactly," the doctor agreed.

Toffee gazed disappointedly at the doctor's slight figure.

"Killers, nowadays," she murmured unhappily, "just aren't what they used to be. Maybe it's the shortages."

The doctor's eyes were heavy with exasperation as they turned toward her. "I do wish you weren't so preoccupied with murder," she said tiredly.

"You mean you're not?" Toffee returned quickly.

"Certainly not. I wouldn't have killed Mr. Epperson and Miss Logan if they hadn't forced me to. They got to spying into my private affairs, and I had to put an end to it somehow."

"The method seems a little extreme," Toffee pointed out. "A good old-fashioned talking-to might have been simpler . . . or were you afraid of hurting their feelings?"

The doctor waved an impatient hand through the air.

"They were only laboratory assistants and they insisted on knowing what I was working on. So I simply obliged them. I contrived to leave a couple of capsules where they would be sure to find them. I was certain they'd both be destroyed by the blast, but that fool woman . . . she never did anything right . . . got outside the radius of vaporization. Naturally, I had to shoot her."

"Oh, naturally," Toffee broke in. "Anyone silly enough to get

outside a perfectly good radius of vaporization deserves to be shot. I see what you mean."

"If you must speak," the doctor said scornfully, "try to say something intelligent."

"Give me time," was Toffee's bland reply, "and I'll build up a really good insult for you."

"But we were talking of other things," the doctor said loftily, wagging a finger toward a group of chairs before his desk. "You'd better sit down."

HESITANTLY, Marc and Toffee accepted the invitation. Toffee crossed one lovely leg over the other and regarded it bleakly. Obviously, she thought it a waste in such scientific surroundings. Her determined belief in the idea that sex, if just given half a chance, could surmount any obstacle, seemed in grave peril of disproof. It was the first time that her faith in herself had ever been shaken, and it was not a nice feeling. She scowled at the doctor, who quickly averted his eyes. He sat down down at the desk, dropped the gun on its glistening surface.

"And now," he said, shifting his attention to Marc, "I think we'd better get to the point of your visit. And just to relieve your minds, I'll tell you that you are not to be killed."

Toffee brightened.

"No," the doctor continued, "You were brought here, Mr. Pillsworth, because you are one of America's most influential advertising men. As such, you can be of use to me." He smiled wryly. "I didn't know of your profession when I placed Miss Logan in your home and knocked you out."

"You have something to advertise?" Marc asked evenly. "Don't tell me you're reopening Murder Incorporated under new management."

"No." The doctor smiled. "But I've something to advertise just the same . . . a button."

"A button?" Marc and Toffee chorused unmusically.

The doctor smiled at their surprise. "This button," he said, and he pointed to a smooth white disk set in the corner of his desk . . . an ordinary push button.

Toffee and Marc exchanged glances. Both asked questions. Neither received answers.

"I once had a plan," the doctor continued dreamily, "and I worked for years to perfect a bomb . . . a curious sort

of bomb. It was to be charged with infectuous bacteria, and it could be hurled into the regions high above the earth by catapult. The result would have polluted the very heavens. All the rainfall thereafter, and eventually, all the water supplies of the world would have become deadly to human life. Everyone would have died. It would have been ghastly . . . a magnificent triumph of science." He shrugged philosophically. "I never did get it perfected."

"Thank heaven!" Marc murmured.

The doctor smiled again more broadly. "So I worked out something else."

"Eh?"

"Oh my, yes. Only this time I haven't failed. You remember what happened to the rock and Mr. Epperson down on the beach, Mr. Pillsworth?"

Marc nodded dumbly.

"Wouldn't it be dreadful if such a thing happened to the world? Wouldn't it be terrible if the whole world suddenly burst apart and became nothing more than a fleeting vaporous body in the universe?"

"What's he talking about?" Toffee asked frightenedly.

"I'm talking about the button," the doctor said. "Would you believe it, if I told you that I could achieve such a disaster by simply pressing that button? It would all be over in less than a second."



Chapter 5

A HEAVY silence crashed into the room and throbbed as quietly as a battery of kettle drums in full cry, pounding on the nerves like a trip hammer. Finally, when Marc spoke, it was only to force it back by the sheer force of his voice.

"I . . . I don't believe it," he faltered.

"Are you forgetting what happened on the beach?" the doctor asked. "And besides, it doesn't matter whether you believe or disbelieve it. The point is that you are going to tell the world about it. You're going to sell the world that button for a very nice price . . . its freedom. Either things will be done my way in this world from now on, or there'll be no world. I'm simply giving you the biggest advertising assignment of all time. You're a lucky man, Mr. Pillsworth. I shall rule the world and you shall be my spokesman."

"I . . . I don't believe it," Marc repeated doggedly. "You're lying."

"I've told you that you don't have to believe it," the doctor went on triumphantly. However, one fact remains; if I do not receive, by radio, assurances from the governments of the world, beginning within the next twenty-four hours, that

they will hold all resources and manpower at my disposal, pending my wishes, I shall not hesitate to press the button. And please believe me, I have enough charged material ready that it won't leave even so much as a memory."

"Twenty-four hours!" Marc gasped.

"Mr. Pillsworth!" the doctor exclaimed. "I know your resources! And I've waited a long time for this! The fate of the world rests in your hands!"

"Yes," Toffee put in derisively. "The doctor has a right to a little fun after working so hard for so long. Don't be a kill-joy, Marc."

"But I'll be arrested for murder the minute I show myself," Marc protested. "And who'd believe any of this, anyway? What about that?"

"Those," the doctor said wearily, spreading his long hands before him, "are your problems. I'm sure you'll find a solution to them."

Toffee rose gracefully from her chair and swung easily toward the desk. "You make it all sound so easy doctor," she said acidly. And so startling was her movement, so distracting her lovely body in motion, that neither Marc nor the doctor noticed that, in turning, she had scooped the gun from the corner of the desk, where the doctor had dropped it. But now that they did notice, another fact was also blaringly apparent. She was pointing the gun in the wrong direction. Grasped by the muzzle, it was aimed directly at her own smooth midriff.

"Hands up!" she announced dramatically.

"Turn it around!" Marc yelled. "You're sticking yourself up!"

"If you press that trigger," the doctor said calmly, "I'll press this button." His hand was already moving across the desk.

Marc swung quickly out of his chair, but overlooked the fact that one foot was still twisted nervously around a metallic leg. It was a disastrous oversight. The tardy foot, working in stiff opposition to his urgent forward movement, he sprawled awkwardly in mid-air, then came down, head-first, on the gleaming floor. Coming to haphazard rest, he rolled over, grinned foolishly and closed his eyes in involuntary slumber. He was out like a cat at night.

The minute Marc's eyes closed, the gun skittered clatteringly across the floor. Toffee couldn't have held it any longer

if she'd wanted to. She'd vanished into thin air.

Dr. Herrigg stared bewilderedly at an area, which, to his scientific mind, had no right to be vacant. A moment ago it had been occupied by a highly disconcerting young lady with red hair. Now, it was as empty as a rejected lover's heart. He passed a hand over his eyes, then looked again. It was still empty.

SOMETHING cool and damp struck Marc across the face, and he opened his eyes to find the doctor peering anxiously down at him, a cloth in his hand.

"Where is the girl?" he demanded.

Marc sat up and stared at him blankly, wondering the same thing. Toffee should be materialized, now that he was conscious again.

"I don't know. You haven't done anything to her?"

"Of course not. She was right here when you fell. She simply vanished."

"She must have sneaked out during the confusion," Marc said, thinking that what the doctor didn't know wouldn't hurt either of them. It was his own opinion that Toffee had materialized elsewhere and gone for help.

"But that's impossible! This place is locked electrically."

"In her way," Marc replied smilingly, "Toffee is rather scientific herself."

"Well, my men will catch her before she goes very far," the doctor said a bit more calmly. "She won't be able to get away."

"Your men?"

"Oh, I have quite a staff here."

"How do you keep them? Surely they don't approve of what you're doing?"

"They were brought here just as you were. They think they're on a very secret mission for the government, and remain as voluntary prisoners."

There was a soft, whirring sound and they both turned toward the slit-like door opposite the one through which they had come earlier. Swiftly, the metal panel shot up to reveal a disheveled Toffee, squirming in the tremendous clutches of a large, muscular young man, whose face bore the bloody handiwork of her long, sharp fingernails. Toffee's face bore only the marks of outrage.

"Get those clammy hands off me!" she shrieked, "or I'll

scratch that nasty face of yours out of existence!"

"You` already have, lady," the young man returned peevishly. "You've probably ruined it forever."

"I've done you a service then!" Toffee barked. "You should be glad to be rid of that ugly thing."

"Aw, lady," the fellow protested. "Is that any way to talk?"

"It's one way," Toffee retorted, and apparently anxious to have an end to the matter, she silently delivered a jabbing blow to the young man's stomach.

"Oof!" was her victim's singular comment, and he immediately released her to clutch at the damaged section.

Toffee pivoted and strode into the room with queenly elegance.

"That," she announced with emphasis, "is no gentleman." The doctor looked at her and smiled.

"Apparently you got the wrong door," he said. "Do you like my laboratory?"

"It looked like a bathroom to me," Toffee snapped. "And don't rub it in, atom brain. If I'd got out the other way, you'd be plenty washed up by the time I got through with you. Make no mistake about that!"

"But you didn't," the doctor grinned, then turned to Marc. "Now that the young lady has been recovered, and no harm done, I imagine you're anxious to get to your work? We've already wasted nearly an hour."

Marc nodded, anxious to be away from this place at any cost.

"I'll have to ask you to replace your blindfolds," the doctor said smoothly. It's of prime importance that you do not know where this place is located. I wouldn't like to see you leading the police back here."

While the business with the blindfolds was being transacted, the forgotten young man at the door seemed to recover his vagrant breath. He straightened up and glared at Toffee.

"And you ain't no lady, either!" he proclaimed spitefully. Toffee clawed the air blindly.

"Lead me to him!" she wailed. "Just lead me to him!"

SHERIFF MILLER looked grieved.

His expression was the one of a man who had been tried

beyond endurance. His eyes, as though seeking escape, darted to the darkened window, then back to the disordered couple standing before him. He tried vainly to resist a feeling that the atmosphere in that little office had gotten too heavy for the structure's thin walls. Somewhere, somehow, something would have to give very soon. And it seemed, to him, that his sanity stood a good chance of being the first to go . . . if it hadn't already.

"Now, let's have that again," he drawled dragging his reluctant eyes back to Marc and Toffee.

"We were kidnapped," Marc began. " . . . by the man who's . . . " Toffee continued impatiently.

The sheriff's hand moved for silence more swiftly than either of them had supposed it could. His eyes moved beseechingly toward the ceiling. His lips murmured a silent prayer . . . or curse.

"I know! I know!" he groaned. "By the man who's going to blow up the whole ding blasted world! You ain't said a word about nothin' else since my deputies come draggin' you in here. And if I have to listen to any more about it, I'm going to throw you two in jail and have the key melted down for a watch fob! It is the craziest thing I ever heard in all my whole natural life."

"*Natural* life?" Toffee exclaimed acidly. "He calls life with a face like that natural! If that's nature, I'll take tobasco!"

"What's the matter with my face?" the sheriff asked belligerently.

"What isn't! Just look at that moth-eaten mustache!"

"Stop that!" Marc put in crisply. "We haven't time to haggle over the sheriff's mustache! We've got only twenty-two hours left!"

Injured at having been brought to account by his own prisoner, the sheriff turned vengeful eyes on Marc.

"You're in here fer murder!" he snapped.

"I've got to get to a telephone!" Marc pleaded desperately.

"If you think you're goin' to make me think you're crazy so's you can plead insanity," the sheriff snorted, "you're . . . you're . . . crazy!"

"Make up you're mind, Sheriff," Toffee said demurely.

"Why did you kill 'er?" the sheriff thundered suddenly, leering at Marc.

"I didn't."

"Her body was in your closet!"

"So was yours," Toffee giggled.

The sheriff shuddered and passed a moist hand over an equally moist face, leaving both face and mustache matchingly droopy. He gazed smoldering at Toffee for a moment, then turned his attention resolutely to Marc.

"If you didn't kill 'er, who did?"

"Dr. Herrigg."

"... the man who's going to blow up the world," Toffee elaborated innocently.

The sheriff's huge hand came down thunderingly on the desk.

"That rips 'er!" he screamed. "That cops the cast iron feather duster!" He turned excitedly to one side. "George! George!"

A small, musty rustic emerged from the shadows and shuffled to the sheriff's side. "Yep, Mort?" he queried sadly. "What's up?"

"They are!" the sheriff thundered, pointing a long, gnarled finger dramatically at the captives. "Up fer life, I hope! Lock 'em up. Get 'em out of my sight before I throttle the both of 'em with my own bare hands!"

George cast baleful, faded eyes at his two charges and nodded toward a door at the rear of the room. "Come along peaceable," he quavered. "The man'll have to bunk in with the drunk in number one." He looked at Toffee with a smile that was only a ghost of itself. "You can have a cell all to yourself, Miss. We've got two."

Toffee cast a hopeful glance at the street door, but instead of finding a possible path to freedom, it encountered only what appeared to be a solid wall of gaping mouths and goggling eyes. The villagers, currently looking like an assortment of strangling guppies in an overcrowded aquarium, had turned out to see the murderers; rare things in their quiet town. A low whistle issued from the staring group as Toffee moved into full view.

"Sure hot out tonight, ain't it?" a rural humorist commented sweetly, turning away.

MARC watched dolefully as the drunk, a dapper little man, bearing the mark of elegance in distress . . . and alcoholism in over-abundance . . . tottered uncertainly across the

cell and clung eagerly to the bars. Blinking, he peered at Toffee in the opposite cell. "My wife would kill me," he murmured thickly. "Now I'm seein' redheaded dames!"

Across the aisle, Toffee looked up quickly, the overhead light falling sharply across her vivid face. "Look out who you're calling a dame!" she snapped. "You sodden little alcoholic. Why don't you become anonymous?"

"Geez!" the fellow breathed wonderingly. "She talks! I could hear her just as plain! She talks kinda mean, but she's got a real nice voice."

"Don't let it go to your head," Marc warned sourly. "She'll talk to anyone. She'd even pass the time of day with Jack the Ripper if she had the chance."

"Better than drunks," Toffee commented dryly.

"Don't you like liquor?" the little man asked worriedly.

"Not from a distance. Please breathe out the window."

Obediently, the fellow lurched toward the tiny cell window and perched his chin on its sill. "Like this?" he asked, anxious to please.

"Much obliged," Toffee rewarded him. "That helps a little." She turned anxiously to Marc. "How are we going to get out of here?" she asked.

"We wouldn't be in here in the first place," Marc lamented bitterly, "if that half-witted Herrigg hadn't dropped us right into their laps."

"I guess he thought you wanted to be near the telegraph office. It's just our luck that the jail turned up right next door." Her expression became deeply thoughtful. "Do you think he can really do what he says?"

"How should I know? But I do think we're likely to find out. Even if I manage to get out of here in time, no one will ever believe me. I wouldn't believe it myself. What was down in the laboratory?"

"Oh, nothing much. The usual collection of miscellaneous wires and wheels and tubes. There was just one thing, though. You remember that lightning gadget in the upper room?"

Marc nodded that he remembered.

"Well, there was another of those downstairs, only larger and nearer the floor. I walked right into one of those white beams that holds it up."

"What happened?"

"Nothing really," Toffee went on. "The ball stopped turn-

ing. I guess it would have fallen if I'd broken the beam entirely. When I stepped out, it started revolving again, just as before, only in the opposite direction. That's when that pie-faced gorilla grabbed me."

It wasn't much of a revelation; it didn't leave much room for discussion, and at its conclusion the little cell block became very quiet. The heavy, dewy breathing of the little drunk gave the atmosphere a sort of sad, sighing quality. It was Toffee who finally put an end to it.

"Oh," she said, "I forgot something."

"Huh?" Marc grunted.

"I forgot something," Toffee repeated, and immodestly she thrust a searching finger into the upper portion of her brief costume. She looked like a distressed woman who had falsified her figure only to discover that certain attachments, in spite of their manufacturer's claims, are not always trustworthy. It was a moment of breathless suspense.

"Stop that!" Marc yelled. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I found something in the laboratory," Toffee said, her curious search leading into a series of writhing motions of a very suggestive nature. "I put it away for safe keeping."

"In . . . in your . . .?"

"Yes," Toffee answered quickly. "After all, I don't have any pockets, you know."

"What was it?"

"Something small and white . . . and cold, at first," Toffee panted, snappily shifting hips.

"A capsule? Marc yelled.

"What's a capsule?" Toffee gasped impatiently. "Don't bother me with silly questions at a time like this. I know the thing is here somewhere."



Chapter 6

THE drunk turned eagerly away from the window. His eyes became brilliantly alight, and a grin of sheerest delight spread over his face.

"Turn on the blue lights!" he chortled, then followed the exclamation with an offensively shrill whistle.

"Keep your low notions to yourself," Toffee snapped, pushing back a mop of red hair that had fallen rakishly over one eye. "Things are bad enough without you getting smutty about it all. I'm only looking for something."

"Ain't nothing missing that I can see," the drunk giggled.

"Hit him, Marc!" Toffee yelled. "Smack that evil-minded little ogre!"

"Can't you get along without all that squirming?" Marc pleaded. "Where's your sense of modesty?"

"I don't know," Toffee returned. "But wherever it is, I'll bet it's getting a darned good jolting around."

Then suddenly the performance stopped.

"It's no use," Toffee said. "I've got this thing on too tight, and the thing's hiding where I can't get at it. I'll have to loosen things up a bit."

"Lord love me!" gasped the evil minded little ogre. "If she loosens up much more, she'll be spread out like a picnic lunch."

"Slug him, Marc!"

"We'll close our eyes," Marc compromised. "I'll keep my hand over his."

"All right," Toffee agreed, "but if that dirty little devil tries to peek, hammer him down to the floor! Cut him off at the ankles!"

With Marc's promise that the evil minded little ogre, more recently a nasty little devil, should be served in his prime in case of peeking, the loosening up proceeded in good order. Turning her back, and bending over, Toffee began to shake her shapely torso in a manner that vividly recalled the palmier days of Gilda Grey. It was in this provocative moment that George, the ancient keeper of the keys, stirred by the sound of loud voices, hove onto the scene. Stopping short at the first glimpse of the quaking Toffee, he flushed a deep crimson and turned his faded eyes modestly away.

"You gotta stop that, lady," he whimpered. "It ain't decent, and this is a respectable jail. The sheriff don't like this sort of thing goin' on here."

"Go away!" Toffee yelled distractedly, clutching wildly at her dress. "Get out of here!"

"I ain't gonna leave 'til you promise not to do that any more. It ain't nice." He pointed to Marc and the drunk, still standing starkly still, their eyes clamped determinedly shut. "Just look what you're doin' to them poor boys over there, lady. You ain't gettin' nowhere with them. Their eyes is shut. And look at the big one helpin' the little one to keep from lookin' out."

"Yes," Toffee exclaimed hotly. "I had to practically threaten those 'poor boys' with disfigurement to get them to do it! Now, you get out of here before I start whooping it up all over the lot. I'll tell people you made improper advances."

Instantly, George's face exchanged it's embarrassed redness for a terrified pallor. He knew when he was licked and fled from the room.

"I'm goin' to call the sheriff," he threatened distantly. "He's goin' to be awful mad when he learns what's goin' on."

Unconcernedly, Toffee continued her startling operations just where she'd left off. Almost immediately a small, white



pellet appeared at her feet. Hastily, she readjusted her appropriated draperies and picked it up.

"I've got it!" she called, and the distraught statues in the opposite cell immediately came to life.

"Let's see it!" Marc yelled excitedly.

"Just a minute," Toffee replied. "Wait 'til I get it open. I want to see what's inside."

"Don't!" Marc screamed. "It'll blow up! Throw it over here, to me."

"Oh, all right," Toffee agreed reluctantly. "Here it comes."

Like a bullet dispelled from a gun that was anxious to be rid of its burden, the capsule shot across the aisle, and in spite of Marc's frantic clutching gestures, cracked sharply against an unrelenting iron bar. Then, it dropped back into the center of the passage.

Marc turned dazedly to Toffee, opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. The tiny jail was suddenly all smoke, flame and blackness, more or less in that order, and its surprised inmates were suffering the eerie sensation of having the floor treacherously snatched from beneath their very feet.

ELEVATING his nose from its uncomfortable position as he rode a cold iron bar, Marc glanced unbelieving at the devastation about him. The jail was a shattered shambles, and well ventilated in the extreme. Here and there, ghostly pockets of smoke were arising slowly through beams of moonlight. Somewhere behind him, there was the sound of an iron door being flung aside, and sitting up, he looked around.

"Damn!" Toffee said with elegant profanity. "My dress is a mess."

"The jail hasn't improved much, either," Marc observed. "You hurt?"

"Of course not!" Toffee said, obviously surprised that anyone should ever think of her as anything but indestructible. "I'm still intact."

A dreadful moaning sounded from deep under the pile of debris, and Toffee turned, stepped over the door that was hanging undecidedly by a single hinge, and leaned forward in a listening attitude.

"What is it?" Marc asked. "It sounds like a lost soul."

"It is," Toffee said. "It's your drunken cell mate. He's giving voice."

"I wish he wouldn't be so damned generous with it. He's fairly lavishing voice."

"Must be down pretty deep," Toffee mused. "We can't leave him there."

"Why not?"

"I don't know for sure," Toffee replied uncertainly. "But I'm pretty certain it isn't just the thing to do." She started in the general direction of the noise. "Take heart!" she called. "We're coming!"

"Don't bother!" the voice called back weakly. "It's not very nice down here. You wouldn't like it at all. Just pass down a bottle and go away."

When the last armful of bars had finally been cast melodiously aside, and the little man freed, he regarded Marc levelly, without thanks.

"You didn't have to hit me," he said reproachfully. "I didn't peek much."

"We blew up!" Toffee explained proudly. She waved an arm significantly at the sizable hole in the wall. The fact that the ceiling was almost entirely gone seemed to escape her notice. "Let's go!"

The drunk, an amiable soul, even if a lost one, accepted the explanation without question and smiled agreeably.

"Okay," he said. "Let's take my car and go somewhere. There's some liquor left in it I think." He turned to Marc apologetically. "No offense, old man?"

"None at all," Marc replied absently.

The fellow extended his hand formally and said, "I'm Harold Jenks. Harold J. Jenks, the plumber."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Jenks," Marc said impatiently, anxious to be going. "My name is Dracula. This is my girl friend, Mad Agnes."

"Please to meet *you*, Mr. Dracula," Harold said with careful politeness.

"Heaven help me!" Marc explained desperately. "Let's get out of here!"

And like three spectres, freshly risen from the grave, they filed silently out into the cold quietness of the night. Toffee looked back sadly.

"It wasn't such a bad little jail," she said with becoming sentiment.

"No, it wasn't," Harold agreed thickly. "I've been in worse."

MARC at the wheel, the delivery truck sped down the silvery, moonlit highway, heralding to a slumbering countryside that the services of Harold J. Jenks could be obtained by the very simple operation of calling 23-J. This lie was blatantly blazoned on the side of the vehicle in impressive gilt letters. As for Harold J. Jenks, himself, far from standing ready to rush to the aid of housewives in moist distress, he was, at the moment, behind those very letters in the company of Toffee and an assortment of suspicious looking bottles, and caroling at the top of his lungs. The two of them, joined together in absolute discord, were engaged in a frightful recital of bawdy ballads, each new selection seeming to rival its forerunner for sheer obscenity. Marc, long since giving up any hope of restraining this wild party, tried merely not to listen to it. And things might have gone on in this disquieting fashion all night if the truck hadn't unexpectedly coughed, sputtered, then lavished its last gasp on an asthmatic halt.

"What's the matter?" Toffee asked, dropping out of the current vocal massacre long enough to peer owlishly over the back of the seat.

"We're out of gas," Marc replied. And it was a curse.

"Where are we?" Harold muttered weakly from the darker reaches of the merchandise compartment. "Is there any liquor nearby?"

Marc thrust his head out of the window then drew it slowly back. "We're opposite the beach house," he replied disgustedly, "right where we started."

"Is there any liquor there?" Harold asked. "We're running low."

"Don't I know it!" Marc growled peevishly. "They don't run any lower than you two. At least you could have told me we needed gas. The sheriff will be catching up with us any minute now, and he'll probably string us up this time. He might forgive a little murder, but blowing up his jail is a serious matter."

Harold lapsed unconcernedly into discordant melody once more, but this time he was not joined by Toffee.

"We'd better get out of here," she said. "Let's hide in the house."

"We can't go there. It's full of cops."

"Well, at least, we can hide in the woods."

"We'll have to," Marc nodded. "Drag that answer to a dis-

tiller's prayer out of there and let's go. I think those lights back there on the bend belong to the sheriff's car."

WHEN they were safely in the woods, and Harold had been persuaded that his future would be more secure without melodic profanity . . . even a rendition of "The Old Pine Tree," especially suited to the occasion . . . Marc turned his attention to the road. The sheriff's car was already beside the delivery truck.

"What are they doing?" Toffee hissed.

"Searching the truck."

"Won't do 'em any good," Harold chuckled softly. "There isn't any more liquor in it."

"They're leaving now," Marc called back. "They're headed for the house. I guess they think we're up there."

"Good," said Toffee. "That gives us more time anyway."

"More time for what?" Marc asked, turning toward her and slumping dejectedly against a tree. "What can we do out here in these woods?"

"I don't know," Toffee said reflectively. "But I feel something in the back of your subconscious that's trying to break through. If I just concentrate a minute, I may get it. It has something to do with these woods, I think. Try to make your mind a blank. That'll help a lot in establishing a contact. I could knock you out," she suggested, "and return there."

"I'll just have to make my mind a blank," Marc answered hastily.

And for a time a heavy silence fell over the trio.

"Are these pine trees?" Toffee asked finally, breaking the quiet.

"Good grief!" Marc groaned. "I concentrate myself almost into a coma to make my mind a blank for you, and all you do is wonder about the scenery."

"No, No," Toffee said, fluttering a hand delicately. "That's what I got from your subconscious; a memory of the scent of pines . . . if that's what they are. You smelled them when you were blindfolded . . . the first time."

"I don't remember."

"Of course you don't. You were too busy thinking about other things with your conscious mind. But your subconscious recorded it, and it's still there. It was after Dr. Herrigg stopped the car and we all got out."

"But we walked for half an hour after that."

"I know. But at least we know where we started from. The memory was very strong when we came into these woods. We must have been just about there. The atmosphere is identical. There was also the sound of the sea. We walked away from it. Where would you be if you walked half an hour straight into these woods?"

"At a swamp clearing. But there isn't anything there."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. It's part of my property."

"There's something else," Toffee said slowly. "We heard the ocean again, just before we arrived at Herrigg's laboratory. So we couldn't have walked back into the woods. We must have gone somewhere else."

"But we traveled straight ahead," Marc objected.

"I know what happened!" Toffee cried. "We *did* turn! We never stopped turning. We walked in a circle through these very woods. Even people who aren't blindfolded often walk in circles when they think they're going straight. At least they do in forests. Herrigg was purposely throwing us off the track!"

"I think you are right!" Marc explained enthusiastically. "Maybe we'll stop Herrigg yet!" Then the excitement suddenly died from his voice. "But if we traveled in a circle," he said, "we should be at Herrigg's place now. There's nothing near here but the beach house."

"But we were closer to the ocean than this," Toffee argued. "We were right next to it."

"The beach?"

"I don't think so," Toffee reflected. "We went downward, but not on a wooden stairway. It must have been on the other side of the cliff."

"But we couldn't have gone down there. It's a sheer drop."

"But we did," Toffee insisted. "We were inside or under that cliff. I'm dead sure of it. At least we can't lose anything by looking."

"Nothing but our lives," Marc commented dryly. "And as things stand, that's next to nothing." He crossed to Harold, who was currently drowsing, and grasped him by the shoulder. "Come on," he said. "Let's go."

Harold opened one doggy eye and gazed up hopefully. "We going to get some grog?" he asked foggily.



Chapter 7

MARC stopped and looked back over his shoulder. From where the three of them were standing in the sloping tunnel, he could not see the entrance, but the faint, luminous glow of reflected moonlight marked its probable location. Also it gave the passage an eerie, under-water appearance.

"We've come quite a distance," he whispered. "We must be almost level with the ocean by now. I wondered how Herrigg ever found this place. It looked like an ordinary wash-out from the highway."

Toffee tugged at his sleeve. "He probably built it that way himself," she hissed. "Let's keep going."

"Reminds me of a downstairs saloon in Omaha," Harold put in with a misguided attempt at sociability. "You go down this little passage, and . . ."

There was a sudden, soft slapping sound, and Harold became strangely mute.

"We'll hear about your disreputable meanderings some other time," Toffee said menacingly.

And, for a time, they traveled on in silence.

Then, as they rounded a bend in the tunnel, Toffee, who

had self-appointedly taken the lead, suddenly darted back, and forced Marc and Harold back against the rough, rocky wall.

"Take it easy, Harold complained. "You trying to split my head open?"

"I couldn't stand the fumes," Toffee retorted. "I think he saw me."

"Who?" hissed Marc. "Who saw you?"

"There's an open space down there," Toffee whispered. "And there's a guard standing in it. I saw him silhouetted against the ocean. He may have been looking right at me."

Suddenly the little party froze as a voice echoed through the tunnel.

"Geez, Mac!" it said. "Did you see that, up in the passage, just now?"

"Nope," came the voice of Mac. "Didn't see a thing."

"I did," the voice went on wonderingly. "I could have sworn I saw a beautiful redheaded angel. She was walking straight for me, just as pretty as you please. She looked kinda half-naked."

"Oh, is that all it was?" Mac returned disappointedly. "I see things like that every once in awhile. They come and go, those angels. You've just been down here too long. You'll get over it. They go away after a time."

"I don't want to get over it," the voice said positively. "Not when I'm seeing dames like that!"

"Dames!" Toffee breathed hotly. "I'll show that block-head who's a dame!"

"Hold on!" Marc rasped, placing a restraining hand on her arm. "If they think you're an apparition, let's not disillusion them. Get out there in that patch of moonlight and try to look ethereal . . . if it's possible . . . while Harold and I sneak up from the shadows." He swung about and mistrustfully confronted the weaving Harold. "Grab a rock," he directed. "We're going to tuck them in for the night."

"Going to play a trick, eh?" Harold winked happily, grabbing an undersized boulder. "I'm just crazy about tricks." And staggering under his burden of liquor and rock, he started after Marc, who was already moving cautiously against the shadowed wall.

SLOWLY, rhythmically, Toffee moved into the moonlight, her arm swaying gracefully over her head. In the

diffused, silver spotlight, she looked more like a lovely other-world figure than any halucination would ever dare.

"Yipes!" a voice, Mac's, breathed worshipfully. "Look, Walt! now I'm seeing it. This is the best one yet."

"Yeah," whispered Walt apparently overcome. "She's too beautiful to be true. I wish she were real."

The angel was strangely responsive to flattery. It renewed its efforts.

"Wow!" Walt moaned happily. "It's the first time I ever had a vision that did a strip tease! This is better than a show."

Instantly, as though to punctuate the remark, there were two almost simultaneous thuds, and Toffee's enthusiastic audience, looking like bobby soxers at a Frankie Laine matinee, tumbled blissfully to the ground.

"Stop that!" Marc rasped, stepping over one of the slumbering guards, "Can't you do anything without taking off your clothes?"

"Yes," Toffee snickered wickedly. "But it isn't much fun. Did you have to knock them out so soon? I was only getting started."

"Never mind," Marc growled. "We've got to concentrate on getting back to Herrigg. The entrance must be near here. Do you see a panel anywhere?"

It's probably disguised," Toffee offered. "When that ape grabbed me, he just rubbed his hand over the wall to open the door. We might try rubbing this wall and see what happens. It may be an invisible beam that has to be broken at close range."

"Anything's worth a try," Marc answered, and accordingly, advanced to the wall and began running his hands swiftly in both directions.

For a time the little party clawed silently at the wall like a trio of demented sand crabs. It was doubtful that Harold really knew the purpose of this activity, but he joined in with great good will. Finally, their industry came to an end as Marc spoke:

"I think I've got it," he whispered. "There's a smooth spot over here."

Even as he spoke, a sudden flash of bright light fell over them as a slit appeared in the side of the cliff, to reveal the familiar dome-like room. Marc stole back for another look at the guards, and finding them still unconscious, returned swiftly to

the door.

"Is Herrigg there?" he asked, approaching Toffee.

"I don't see him," Toffee answered. "I think the room's empty."

They crept forward. Toffee was right; the room was deserted. Removing his jacket, Marc moved into the passage again, and by hanging the garment on a jagged rock, managed to cover the smooth surface that covered the door.

"We don't want to be trapped in here," he explained, returning inside. Then he nodded to Toffee. "Keep an eye on the guards."

"Okay," she agreed. "What are you going to do?"

"Look for Herrigg," Marc replied, "and try to get the jump on him."

He didn't have to look far, for almost instantly there was a soft whirring sound that announced the opening of the laboratory door. Marc dashed swiftly toward it and stood to one side. Toffee crossed to the open doorway and dissolved into its shadows. She motioned frantically to Harold, still in the center of the room, but in answer, he only blinked and swayed undecidedly from side to side, obviously blinded by the bright light.

The door slid open and Dr. Herrigg stepped into the room. Whatever he expected to find, it is certain that an alcoholic plumber was not among those items, for instantly, at the sight of Harold, he stopped short, stunned. Indeed, so acute was his surprise that he didn't notice Marc, almost next to him. The gun seemed to appear magically in the doctor's hand as he advanced slowly toward the befogged Harold. Harold, for his part, gazed uncertainly at the shocked scientist and greeted him with mistaken enthusiasm.

"Got a shot, doc?" he asked hopefully.

IT was at this precise moment that Marc sprang after the doctor. Leaping lightly forward, he grasped Herrigg's upper arms firmly and pulled them sharply behind the startled man. There was a quick barking sound, and a bullet whined thinly over Harold's head, then ricocheted from the solid, circular wall. As the gun clattered to the floor, Harold followed its example, and dropped to his knees, looking much like a terrified, repentant sinner at a revival.

"Cripes, Doc!" he muttered feverishly. "You got it all

wrong. All I want is a drink!"

"Grab that gun!" Marc panted, holding the furiously struggling doctor. "Cover him!"

Toffee, like an Olympic runner in the last stretch, darted swiftly from the shadows and scooped the weapon from the floor. This time she held it correctly.

"Stand back!" she yelled blood thirstily, slipping into what she believed to be the spirit of the occasion. "I'll blow his ugly head off!"

The doctor, unexpectedly confronted by this chilling display of feminine willingness to mayhem, became instantly docile. "Don't shoot!" he pleaded.

Marc released him and moved toward Toffee. He took the gun from her and held it levelly on Herrigg. "Let's go, Herrigg," he said. "Let's join the sheriff."

"You can't do this!" the doctor protested frantically. "You can't!"

"No?" Marc asked, nodding toward the door. "Just step right this way."

There was a general movement toward the outer passage, but it was suddenly arrested like an abrupt foot-fall in the dark that had reached for a stairway too soon. The party, quarry and hunters alike, suddenly froze, as a wild baying echoed weirdly through the outer tunnel.

"Monsters!" Toffee screamed with sincerest terror.

And in the next moment it seemed that she was right. Two sets of fiendish, glowing eyes appeared in the doorway, and below them, in appropriate places, were two wide, slavering mouths. This paralyzing spectacle was presently explained, though made no more lovely, as the eyes and mouths advancing, proved to be the formidable property of two giant bloodhounds. They were straining against a couple of taut chain leashes, at whose ends was a single, mammoth hand. It was the hand of sheriff Miller. He surveyed the transfixed party with triumphant eyes.

"Here they are boys!" he called out loudly. "Come and get 'em!"

The call was greeted by the additional, and no more reassuring appearance of three deputies, all of uniform and unbelievable proportions. One of them carried a gun of distant, but nonetheless dangerous, vintage.

"Which one we after, Mort?" one of them said in a

voice that sounded as though it was being dragged through a gravel pit.

The sheriff pointed to Marc. "That tall, murderous buzzard," he drawled.

Dr. Herrigg, seeing his deliverance at hand, glanced eagerly toward the desk, the button on its corner. Marc, realizing that he had lost his advantage, started forward.

"There's your murderer!" he cried, pointing a trembling finger at the doctor and praying that the sheriff would believe him. He still had his gun, and intended using it if Herrigg made a move. The doctor seemed to sense this and remained tentatively where he was.

"I don't know what he's talking about," he said suavely. "This man is obviously suffering from a mental disorder."

"Don't believe him!" Marc yelled. "Ask him about his laboratory."

The sheriff looked baffled. He rubbed his free hand slowly over the back of his neck. It seemed an hour before the act had been completed, and he said, "Grab 'em both, boys. Hold 'em quiet until we find out what this is all about."

The "boys" did as they were told with a little more efficiency, it seemed, than was absolutely necessary.

"And now," the sheriff said unhurriedly, "I might's well tell you two, if either of you make a move, we'll just have to fix you for good."

IN DISAGREEMENT with these new developments, Toffee started determinedly forward, but suddenly stopped short as the bloodhounds turned toward her and snarled. She'd seen hungry glances directed at her legs before, but never any quite so terrifyingly hungry as these. The sheriff regarded her lazily.

"I'd sure hate to see a pretty girl like you all chewed up and spit out," he said with genuine sadness. "But if you make another move, I'm afraid I won't be able to hold the hounds no longer. They ain't had a lot to eat lately."

Toffee glanced nervously at the great, hulking beasts, and didn't make another move. The sheriff directed his attention to Marc's captor.

"Keep a sharp eye on that 'un, Fred," he said. "He's pretty desperate."

Meantime, Harold forgotten and ignored in the background, was beginning to feel a bit left out of things. He start-

ed vaguely forward.

"I'm pretty desperate too," he said jarringly.

Surprised, everyone turned in unison to look at the woozy little fellow.

"I'm Hypo Hal," Harold went on theatrically, delighted by such unanimous attention and reluctant to lose it. "I think I'll make a confession or two."

He swaggered importantly across the room to the desk, and sitting on its edge, glanced back to check the setting. "What's this?" he asked absently, jabbing a finger toward the button on the corner.

"Don't!" screamed Marc. And with a sudden motion of his shoulders, he lurched free of the deputy's heavy grasp.

"Get 'im, Fred!" the sheriff bellowed.

In the furious moment that followed, Marc was briefly aware of just two things. The first was a Gargantuan fist, moving swiftly into his face; the second . . . and most alarming . . . was Harold's finger, pressing firmly down on the white button. Both made contact at the same dreadful instant.

There was a sudden, terrific burst of white, white light, then complete, roaring darkness.

MARC felt the floor go fluid under his feet. Then the swirling tide caught him up, and he was spiraling downward into the deep blackness of a gigantic whirlpool. Nearer and nearer the pointed, thrashing center he moved, but he did not struggle against it. Somehow, he was suddenly too weary to care. He relaxed and let himself be borne along in the racing, circling current.

The journey ended just as it reached its twisting, turning climax. Deposited lightly on a soft, velvety surface, Marc lay perfectly still for a moment, savoring a strange feeling of quiet contentment. Slowly he opened his eyes and gazed out at the muted greenness of the quiet little valley. He ran an eager hand over the grass. It was as soft and fine as rabbit's fur. With a contented sigh, he rolled over. Then he sat up abruptly.

The pert, vivid face that was lowered to his, was familiar. Also, it was irritated in expression. Dangerously so.

"What's the big idea?" Toffee demanded hotly.

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean! Just listen to him! You know very well what I mean. Shoving me back in your subconscious just when

things really get exciting!"

Marc glanced questioningly around.

"We're in the valley of your obnoxious mind," Toffee explained ungraciously. "Now I'll have to go back to work, putting away that stupid miscellaneous information. And what trash it is! It's what I get for taking the job of an inferior mind. I should have held out for a decent intellect."

"I'm sorry," Marc murmured, too cowed to argue.

The anger immediately faded from Toffee's puckish features. She fell to her knees beside him.

"I'm sorry I said that, Marc," she said with unaccustomed gentleness. I didn't mean it. I wouldn't be anyone else's subconscious manifestation for anything in the world. I swear it!"

"World!" The word struck a responsive chord in Marc's memory. "I've got to get back!" he cried, jumping to his feet.

"Not until you kiss me goodbye," Toffee insisted, rising after him.

Cool lips and whirling dizziness often went hand in hand, but never as when the lips involved were Toffee's. Suddenly, the valley had begun to spin, and Marc felt himself being lifted upward. There was a dreadful rush of wind, and Toffee was torn from his embrace. A moment later, as through the roar of a tumultuous ocean, her voice reached him faintly.

"Don't forget!" she was calling. "Don't forget that I'm always waiting here, in the back of your mind. I'm always here, Marc!"

Marc attempted a reply, but the screaming wind forced the words back into his throat. He tried not to notice that the light was growing dim; that a heavy blackness was drawing around him, everywhere.



Chapter 8

MARC opened his eyes, and cautiously felt his jaw. It hurt. Taking this in stride, he directed his attention to his surroundings. He was propped up against the passage wall in a more-or-less, back-of-the-neck, sitting position. From the opening at the end, he could see that the half-light of early morning was reaching in to waste a delicate, silvery outline on an immense pile of rocky wreckage. There was a scraping sound behind him, and he turned.

"You finally wake up?" the sheriff drawled, moving toward him. "Might's well tell you right now, you ain't hurt none, so's you won't worry."

Marc started to his feet.

"You don't have to run from me no more," the sheriff said. "You're in the clear. Herrigg told us all about the murder; how he shot the woman and put 'er in your house. We ain't after you no more."

Marc relaxed.

"Where is everyone?" he asked. "What happened?"

"They've all went," the sheriff said uneasily. "Everyone 'cept you and me . . . and one other."

"One other?"

"Yeah," the sheriff went on hesitatingly. "The . . . girl She didn't get out when the blast went off, I guess. We looked fer 'er, but didn't have no luck. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you. She was such a pretty little thing. But I guess she's happier where she is, if it comforts you to think so."

"Yes. I guess so," Marc replied, smiling wryly. His eyes became reflective. "What about the doctor?"

Well, I ain't so sure about him. He acted all right while we was talkin' about the murder, but soon's we brought up this place down here and the rig he had in 'er, it seems like he just went plumb outa his head. He kept mumblin' something about somebody breakin' some sort of beam and reversin' a mechanism. Kept yellin' that it caused the earth to get itself all uncharged, whatever that means. And he called that poor little girl names 'til you just wouldn't believe it." The sheriff paused and gazed intently at Marc. "You got any idea what he was goin' on about?"

Marc considered the question for a long moment. "No, I haven't," he said finally, "I haven't any idea at all."

"You was ravin' about him blowin' up the world, last night."

"I guess I was just excited," Marc replied evasively.

"That's what I thought at the time."

Marc got slowly to his feet, and tried his legs. They felt a little stiff but still serving their purpose.

"What about the laboratory?" he asked.

"Blew to kingdom come," the sheriff replied. "Ain't nothin' left of 'er. Guess we'll never know what was going on in 'er. We got the men out of 'er all right, but they didn't know much about what they was here for."

Marc nodded and started slowly up the passage. He was anxious to be away from the place.

"I think I'd like to go back to the house," he said, "if you don't mind."

"Don't mind at all," the sheriff answered amiably, following after him. "As a matter of fact, I feel a little foolish about chasin' you around like I did. But after you locked me up and blasted my jail house, I guess it wasn't my fault I thought you were a desperado."

When they reached the top of the cliff and stepped out onto the highway, Marc had to close his eyes a moment against the bright morning sun. He shook his head. At first there was

a sharp pain, but when it had passed he felt better. He opened his eyes again, started to turn to the sheriff, then did a quick double take toward the beach house. His eyes grew wide with disbelief.

A blue convertible was standing pertly in the drive.

WITHOUT a word of explanation, Marc ran eagerly across the highway and toward the house, leaving the sheriff to his own reflections on the daftness of city folk.

"Julie! Julie!" he cried, reaching the path. And in the next instant he nearly tumbled as he saw his wife, cool, blonde and radiant as ever, move gracefully through the front door and smile down at him from the tiny terrace. Then, somehow, she was in his arms.

"When did you get here?" Marc asked when he could.

"Just fifteen minutes ago," Julie said cheerfully. "I drove all night to get here. I had no idea you'd be at the beach so early. I thought I'd have to drag you out of bed." She sighed contentedly. "I just couldn't stand another day without you. I just couldn't face it."

"What about separate vacations?"

Julie's eyes became wide and innocent. "What are those?" she asked.

"All over it?"

She nodded, flushed just a little.

Through their conversation, Marc had been vaguely aware of a man's voice within the house. It seemed excited.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Oh, that!" Julie laughed. "It's the radio!" She looked excited, as though having just remembered something important. "You should just hear what's going on! It's absolutely fantastic!"

"Going on?"

"Yes. It's the strangest thing. Early this morning there was some sort of disturbance all through the earth's surface. In some places, it was so severe, it knocked down whole buildings. I really don't understand it very well, but at first they thought it was just an earthquake, but scientists proved somehow that it couldn't have been. Now, they've decided that it must have been some sort of weird bombardment from another planet . . . Mars or the moon, or one of those places. Russia even claims to be holding Orson Wells responsible.

"Anyway, the most amazing things have been happening ever since! Already, they've formed a World Army in case of further attacks. And everyone's talking about a United World. They're really sincere about it, too. The world has really become united in just the last few hours. It's odd how swiftly these things can be accomplished when they really get down to it. They've settled matters that no one ever thought they'd agree on. It's almost unbelievable. It seems we just had to have some sort of outside threat to pull us all together."

"Are you sure about all that?" Marc asked.

"Oh, yes!" Julie nodded positively. "Some places got a real jolting." She drew closer to him. "I'm so glad you weren't in any of them," she went on softly. "I'm so thankful you were safe here, where nothing ever happens . . . where you could have a nice, quiet vacation."

Marc's mouth flew widely open, then snapped shut. Grinning, he slipped an arm about Julie's waist and pulled her gently toward the house.

"So am I," he said quietly.

THE END

TOFFEE HAUNTS A GHOST





Chapter 1

AS a rule, in moments of acute peril, most faces can be relied upon to arrange themselves into the traditional expressions of open-mouthed, pop-eyed terror. Not so, however, the willful countenance of Marc Pillsworth. The lean Pillsworth phiz, openly disdainful of the accepted manifestations of fear, regally side-stepped into something that looked curiously like tight-lipped primness. At the moment it had tied itself into such a knot of horror as to appear downright priggish. As the sidewalk split under Marc's feet, throwing him against the unforgiving granite of the Regent Building, the only expletive vigorous enough to force its way through his thinly pursed lips was a sadly depleted, but nonetheless determined "damt."

What had just transpired was extremely upsetting, also quite impossible. Now, if Marc had been careless about looking where he was going . . . But he hadn't. He had been fully aware of the suspended safe . . . an object of considerable tonnage by the looks of it . . . and its precarious position outside the sixth story window. Dangling threateningly out over the street like that, how could he have missed it? He had even taken special care to keep well outside the roped-off safe-

ty area. And yet, when the pulley had slipped, and the safe began to fall, it was as though the great hand of Satan, himself, had taken hold of it and hurled it directly at Marc. It had missed him not by inches, but by the merest fraction of an inch. It was impossible that it could have happened that way; all the laws of physics forbade it. However, for Marc, the morning was already fairly bristling with impossibilities, and while this was not the least of them, neither was it the greatest. Staring apprehensively at the great black lump, now imbedded in the sidewalk, he wondered if it were going to leap from its resting place and crush him against the wall. He wouldn't have been the least bit surprised if it had. In the last few hours he'd come to expect almost anything.

"Damn," he repeated breathlessly.

"You hurt, Bud?"

Marc directed bewildered eyes toward the entrance of the building and saw a workman running swiftly toward him. "No," he said weakly. "It missed me. I'm all right . . . I think. If you want me to sign a statement to that effect, I'll be glad to." He leaned down to flick a bit of cement dust from his trouser cuff and, because of a hand that was trembling badly, did a more complete job than was strictly necessary.

If there was a hand, though, that had every right to tremble, it was the hand of Marc Pillsworth. Actually, it was a wonder the thing wasn't thrashing about like a hooked tuna. His nerves, by now, were as taut and as prickly as the strands on a barbed wire fence.

IT HAD all started early that morning when absenteeism had reared its unlovely head among the ranks of his shirt buttons, thereby making him miss his bus. But Marc, long since hardened to life's minor misfortunes, had waited for a replacement, kissed Julie goodbye at the completion of repairs, and gone in search of a taxi with a certain amount of equanimity. And he had even managed not to be dismayed when, after going to some lengths to snare a cab, the perverse vehicle had had a flat only two blocks from the apartment. It was not until, upon stepping out of the cab to inquire about the delay, he had looked up to see a truck, out of control, heading directly for him. . . . it was not until then that he finally came to the bitter realization that the

routineness of the morning had been irrevocably shattered.

After picking himself stiffly out of a nearby hedge, into which he had hastily retreated for safety, and making sure that no one was injured, Marc had signed an injury waiver, shaken the dust from his soiled dignity and gone quietly in search of other transportation. Even then, all things being equal, the morning might still have resolved itself into a fair semblance of normalcy. Only all things were just about as equal as a private and general on pay day. If Marc had only known it further disaster, just three blocks distant, was already rushing toward him in the person of a bundle-laden, middle-aged woman, hurriedly returning home from an early-morning expedition to the neighborhood market.

The woman had walked sightlessly into Marc just as he stepped from the curb. Ordinarily, such an incident would have meant only a hasty exchange of insincerities. It would have, that is, if it hadn't happened on the very brink of a workman's ditch where some new and very iron pipe was being laid. Catapulted head-first into the trench, Marc would certainly have died of assorted abrasions and fractures if a beefy workman hadn't been standing in precisely the right spot to cushion his fall.

He had signed two waivers that time.

After that, it had only been the negligible journey of five blocks to the incident of the falling safe. It would seem that the fates, gotten up on the murderous side of the bed, were going a bit out of their way to give Marc an untimely nudge into the hereafter.

Now, after quaveringly signing papers for the Regent people, he hurried away from the building and started down the sidewalk. With a rather harassed expression replacing the one of prim fright, he moved toward the corner bus stop. After all, he thought, even if it was only a few more blocks to the office, he would probably do better to play it safe and put himself in the mechanized hands of the city bus company. They'd always taken good care of him before. Besides, his knees were feeling a trifle unhinged.

A small group had already assembled at the corner to await the arrival of the bus, and Marc drew close to it. He wanted to dispel the uneasy feeling that he alone had been singled out and set apart for disaster. He wanted the feeling of safety that is always inherent in any human gathering, no matter

how small. It was unfortunate that his gregarious impulse only led to the brutal trampling of a delicate foot, the property of the most attractive lady in the assemblage.

"Ouch!" yelled Marc's diminutive victim. "You crazy ox!" She glanced significantly at Marc's feet. "Why don'tcha look where you're puttin' them big hooves? You could cripple a girl fer life!"

"Sorry," Marc murmured embarrassedly. "Terribly sorry."

"I should think so!" The girl turned away, still mumbling fretfully.

Edging away, Marc continued to stare at the girl. She reminded him of someone. But who was it? The angry flash of her green eyes, the flaming red of her hair, even the arrogant, curving lines of her supple young body were strongly reminiscent of someone he had once known. His wife? He immediately vetoed the idea. Julie was a stately blonde, and her eyes were blue.

Who then? Someone he'd dreamed? Marc's heart suddenly did a quick backflip. Why Toffee, of course, Toffee!

MARC glanced nervously at the people about him. For a moment he was almost afraid that he'd called out aloud. But apparently he hadn't, for no one was looking at him. Wasn't it odd, he thought, how Toffee faded from his memory almost the moment she was out of sight. Maybe it was because her existence sprang from so strange a source . . . from the depths of his own subconscious mind. Maybe it was because she was really a part of him that he thought of her so seldom; it would be almost like keeping constantly in mind one's own liver or kidneys. His smile was almost wistful as his memory returned to that hectic morning when he'd seen Toffee for the first time . . . outside his dreams. Titian-haired mistress of his subconscious, it had been quite a shock when she had decided to materialize from his dreams, assume physical proportions and step full-blown, as it were, right into the center of his waking hours. Her penchant for building the quietest situation into an affair of raging insanity had made itself distressingly apparent right from the start. And yet, Marc had to admit it, she also possessed a rather endearing aptitude for clearing up the snarls in his life . . . even if her methods were somewhat devious at times. Yes, Toffee was sweet in her way . . . sweet, like a sugar-coated

time bomb. Almost affectionately, Marc wondered what she was doing in his subconscious this morning. Probably seething with anger that he hadn't admitted her to his dreams last night so that she might have a hand into the morning's mishaps. Falling into ditches, being nearly crushed under safes or run down by trucks would be her notion of a real frolic; such was her disposition toward peril and threats of sudden death. Small matters in her gladsome existence. Marc's smile broadened, then vanished as he saw the bus approaching the corner.

Waiting his turn, he absently watched the well-turned ankle of the outraged redhead as its owner moved smartly up the steps, into the bus. That hazard out of the way, he reached for the gleaming handrail and drew herself up to the first step, a little surprised to find that he was still a bit shaky from the morning's excitement. Inside the bus, he steadied himself and reached quickly into his pocket and drew out a handful of change. He searched hastily for the correct fare, found it, and held it out toward the shining collection box. It was just as his hand drew even with the box that the big red sedan suddenly came careening across the intersection and headed directly for the bus. It came head-on, for all the world as though its prime purpose in the scheme of things was to demolish the big vehicle. There was a rending, crashing sound, and suddenly all the air was filled with splintering glass and noise. The sound of Marc's fare falling to the floor was lost in the din of the crash.

MARC'S thirty-two years seemed almost to have doubled as he climbed feebly out of the taxi and paid the driver. Turning, he gazed gratefully at the stairs leading to the Pillsworth Advertising Agency and started uncertainly toward them. Actually, though, for a man who had suffered four consecutive escapes from lacerated death, he was in comparative good shape. Nevertheless, having one's head wedged into the baggage rack of an interurban bus for over fifteen minutes is an experience that is bound to take its toll. Moving up the steps, Marc weaved and groped his way like a man in a drunken stupor. Finally reaching the door to the outer office, he threw his weight against it, wedged it open, and stumbled inside in a manner sharply reminiscent of the entrance of Dan McGrew into the Malamute Saloon. For a moment he just

stood there, his arms dangling lifelessly at his sides, staring stupidly at his employees, who returned the compliment by remaining rigidly spellbound at their desks. Dazed as he was, Marc didn't see the girl coming down the aisle between the desks. And she didn't see him.

A racing cloud of disheveled hair and apparel, she stormed toward Marc in what was obviously a blind rage. The tap of her high heels sounded against the floor with the rapidity of a riveting machine, and an enormous handbag flapped angrily against her slender thigh. It wasn't until she was nearly abreast of Marc that she finally noticed him.

At the sight of Marc, the girl came to a sudden, jerking halt, as though she had run full-tilt against the face of a brick wall. More than that, she looked just as stunned. Going tensely rigid, like a cardboard cut-out of her self, she drew her arms stiffly to her sides, closed her eyes and screamed till it seemed that her vocal chords would snap under the strain. True and strong, her voice shrilled through the office ripping the silence to shreds. Finally completing this awful recital with a flourish right out of the Lucia mad scene, she opened her eyes and pointed a commanding finger at Marc.

"Stay where you are, Mr. Pillsworth!" she bleated. "One step and I'll scream!"

"You've already screamed," Marc reminded her thickly. "And you mustn't do it any more."

"If you move," the girl replied vehemently, "I'll not only do it some more, but louder!"

Marc's blood ran cold at the thought. "Oh, don't," he pleaded. "Please. Whatever the trouble is, I'm sure we can" Holding out a placating hand, he swayed toward her.

"Get away!" the girl yelped with honest terror. "Get away, you . . . you wolf!" And grasping her handbag firmly by its straps, she took hasty aim at Marc's head and arranged a resounding introduction of the two.

Under the impact of the bag, which seemed to be harboring at least a couple of flat irons, Marc sat down heavily on the floor, like a sack of soggy meal. In the blurred starlit confusion that followed, he was vaguely aware of tapping heels and the thunderous slam of a door.

AFTER a moment, in which the spinning universe settled down to a more reasonable pace, Marc prodded his head

with a cautious finger, and finding it where he'd remembered it, he looked up. "What happened?" he asked.

He waited for a reply that was not forthcoming. The agency employees, still rigid at their desks, merely stared back at him with what appeared to be only faintly disguised contempt. Then a door slammed somewhere at the far end of the office and Memphis McGuire, Marc's current secretary, big as the city for which she was named and twice as colorful, swung heavily into view. Just barely avoiding a collision with a desk, she started down the aisle.

Angrily waving a sheaf of papers over her head, her multi-colored dress flapping loosely about her hammy legs, Memphis looked like nothing so much as a circus tent, flag unfurled, being blown along in a typhoon. Reaching Marc, she stopped in front of him, her weight settling itself around her with a sudden shake. She bent down and waved the papers accusingly under his nose.

"You louse!" she bellowed. "You utter, ring-tailed louse!"

Marc stared up into her scowling face like a bewildered child who had just been spanked for saying her prayers. It didn't make sense. None of it. Everyone . . . the world, itself . . . had chosen this day to turn on him. That Memphis, too, should enlist in the ranks of his demented attackers was just too much. He felt like crying. Always, from the very first day of her employment, Memphis had been his staunchest supporter. She had championed his every cause. It was inconceivable that, now, on this mad morning of meaningless outrage, she should turn against him. What had happened? Had she . . . and everyone else in the world . . . gone stark, raving mad?

"Wha . . . what's going on here?" Marc stammered. "Has everyone gone crazy?"

"Crazy is the word!" Memphis thundered. "I must have been clear out of my mind to stay up half the night typing these reports! There's just one thing I want to know. When I sent Miss Hicks into your office with these papers, did you or did you not tell her to go hang them in the lavatory? Just answer me that! That's all!" She straightened up and glowered down at him, a trembling tower of fury. Marc only stared back at him in silent disbelief. "Well, did you!" Her voice pounded against the walls like the beat of a bass drum. "And did you leap at Miss Dugan when she went in with the mail?"

And chase her around the room! Deny it! I dare you! Just you try and I'll smash the ears right off your two-faced head!"

Marc winced. It didn't seem she was leaving him a very attractive alternative. His ears, though a bit large perhaps, had served him well and faithfully so far, and he was anxious to continue the association. Besides, even if the invitation to rebuttal had been made without threat of disfiguration, he was beginning to doubt his physical ability to accept it. The glove of challenge had been thrown down, but he was too weak even to pick it up. Already, Memphis' angry face was beginning to blur and drift lazily back and forth before him. A curious limpness had come into his body, and he felt himself sagging toward the floor.

"Good grief! he's sick!" Memphis' voice came to him distantly, as though through water. Then he felt her arms about his shoulders, holding him away from the floor. "Well, don't just sit there, you gasping parasites, help me carry him into his office!" Though commanding and brusque the voice carried a faint overtone of self-reproach.



Chapter 2

BEING carried . . . or dragged, as it seemed . . . into the quiet confines of his private office, Marc was only half aware of what was happening. However, as he felt the softness of the lounge beneath him, his head began to clear a little. He opened his eyes. The door was just closing on an assortment of backs and a confusion of whispered conversation. Memphis, sitting in a chair next to the lounge, was staring at him with worried concern.

"I didn't mean to let go at you like that, Mr. Pillsworth," she said regretfully. "But, really, you shouldn't have done it. I was so disappointed."

"Disappointed?" Marc asked weakly. "Shouldn't have done what?"

She waved a hand vaguely through the air. "Oh, everything. Drinking in the office. Making passes at the girls. Chasing them. All the rest. Somehow it just doesn't seem right to go on like that in a business office."

"Drinking?" Marc looked deeply perplexed. "Who's been drinking?"

"It's all right," Memphis replied soothingly. "And it

doesn't matter now that's it's all over. I'm sure it won't happen again. Will it?"

"Marc raised himself slowly to one elbow. "What won't happen again?" he asked. "What's been going on here anyway? I demand to know."

"Who knows better than you?" Memphis returned, a touch of temper creeping back into her voice. "Just look at this office"

For the first time Marc turned his attention to his surroundings. The office was a shambles. Paper was strewn everywhere, and in the center of the room, a chair, turned on its back, lay discarded and forlorn. Across from him, by the leg of another chair, a suspicious looking half-filled bottle stood on the floor. The air was redolent with the odor of liquor. Unbelievably, Marc swung his legs over the edge of the lounge, rose shakily to his feet, and toddled toward the offending container. Drawing abreast of it, he squatted down and reached for it. Then, blinking incredulously, he withdrew from it, empty-handed. The battering his head had taken that morning must have affected his sight. He could have sworn the bottle moved out of his grasp of its own accord. Shaking his head, he turned to Memphis.

"How did that get in here?"

"I guess you hauled it in here when you came in this morning."

"Came in this morning?" Marc was more bewildered than ever. "But I'm just now getting here. I was held up. I had an accident . . . a whole lot of accidents."

Bemusement crept stealthily across Memphis' face. "You weren't here until now?" she asked slowly. I'd be the last one to call you a liar, but I saw you with my own eyes. So did Miss Hicks and Miss Graham. Oh, Lord, and don't wish they hadn't!"

Under a wave of dizziness, Marc made his way unsteadily back to the lounge. "You did not," he said fretfully, sitting down. "I wasn't here."

Exasperation finally flashed into Memphis' eyes. "All right," she said unhappily. "So you weren't there. I didn't see you. You're absolutely right, Mr. Pillsworth. And . . . that isn't all you are!"

She may have said more, but if she did, Marc didn't hear her. As he sank back onto the lounge, the room suddenly start-

ed to spin. Then it stopped, and began to fill with writhing, surging waves of blackness. Ink-like liquid was seeping in everywhere, its whispering tide rising swiftly toward him. It was coming so fast! In a moment it covered Memphis, hiding her from view, and he wondered fleetingly why she allowed herself to be submerged without a struggle.

Then, quickly, the blackness washed over the edge of the lounge, and Marc felt himself, light and buoyant, being lifted upward. Up, up and up he moved and then, just as he was nearing the ceiling, there was a terrible sucking sound and he was drawn swiftly downward into unbroken, unending, fluid blackness.

HE MOVED in a drifting delirium that seemed endless and brief all at the same time. Time . . . hours . . . or were they really minutes? . . . dissolved and were lost beyond remembrance. He drifted lazily through the ages, shot fleetingly through racing seconds. Then, just as he had resigned himself to this curious state of timelessness, he was lifted upward once more, and shot out of the darkness, into brilliant, nearly blinding light. Borne on the crest of an ebony wave, he was hurtled forward and heavily deposited on what appeared to be a grassy beach.

He lay flat on his stomach for a time, listening to the dying rumble of the wave. And when it was gone, there was a deep stillness, broken only by the lingering lap-lap of the receding blackness. Rolling over, he saw that he was resting on the topmost point of a grassy knoll. The black waters had entirely disappeared now, and the greenness of the little hill stretched out endlessly in all directions. Here and there, clusters of strange feathery trees swayed gently at the command of a blue vaporous mist. It was so blissfully quiet.

Then something shot past his ear and struck the earth behind him with a soft thud. He turned just in time to see a glistening apple . . . golden and perfectly round . . . rolling down the far side of the mound. He sat up and watched it quizzically.

"Darn!" a voice said shrewishly. "I should have hit him right between his fishy eyes."

Marc swung around, but there was nothing and no one behind him . . . nothing, that is, except one of the strange trees. Curiously alone and aloof, it was the only tree on the

little hill. Getting to his feet, Marc moved warily toward it. Then he stopped short as he noticed an odd fluttering motion in its foliage. Then, all at once, there was a flash of red along one of the branches, and he wondered if it were afire. He drew closer, then stopped again. What he was really looking at was a mop of agitated red hair. A hand suddenly appeared and brushed the hair aside, and two green eyes wide with aggravation, glinted down at him.

Marc recognized them at once. "Toffee!" he exclaimed.

"Miss Toffee to you, mushhead," the girl replied hotly. "I shouldn't think you'd have the brass to show your sniveling face around here after the way you've treated me. A crime, that's what it is!"

"What are you doing up there?" Marc asked noncommittally.

"I'm falling out," Toffee snapped. "Right now, I'm just barely dangling by my toes. But in a second I'm going to let go, and if you know what's good for you, you'll catch me. I lost my balance chucking that apple at you."

"Serves you right," Marc said. He stepped forward, under the tree, and looked up. It was true. Toffee was dangling precariously between two branches. Her foot acting as a grappling hook on one branch, her hand grasping the other, she looked like nothing so much as a shapely pink hammock. Her transparent tunic, always an aloof bystander at best, was ranging loosely to one side, unconcerned that its wearer was shockingly exposed. Marc quickly averted his eyes and held out his arms.

"Okay!" he called. "Let's go!"

Toffee came down promptly and heavily, her sudden weight rocking Marc back on his heels. For a moment it was touch and go between the staggering man and the forces of gravity. But Marc finally won out and righted himself. Then, looking down, he discovered to his horror that Toffee had landed face-down in his arms. Obviously, certain adjustments needed to be made immediately. With a timid hand, Marc tried to do what he could about them.

"Stop pawing me, you wrinkled adolescent!" Toffee yelled. "Put me down!"

And with that, she sank two talon-like fingernails into the flesh of Marc's thigh. Marc's trousers might just as well have been made of tissue for all the protection they afforded

him against the cutting nails.

WITH a piercing scream of agony, he promptly gave Toffee over to the ground, where she landed with a resounding thump. "You little beast!" he cried, clutching his leg. "Of all the ingratitude!"

Toffee looked up owlishly from over her shoulder. "I told you to put me down," she said vindictively. "Surely, you didn't expect me to just hang there while you made finger prints all over my—"

"I was only trying to set you right," Marc cut in quickly.

"Hah!" Toffee jumped lightly to her feet. "From now on," she said, placing a slender hand on a sculptured hip, "I'll take care of my own setting, and don't you ever forget it."

"Do what you want with your precious setting," Marc put in, his irritation mounting. "See if I care. You can hurl the fool thing out of the window for all of me."

"I wouldn't even tilt it over the sill for the best part of you," Toffee sneered. "Not after the torture you've been putting me through lately."

"I torture *you!*" Marc laughed bitterly. "That's good, that is!"

"Then what do you call it?" Toffee made a quick gesture that encompassed the whole valley. "How would *you* like to be locked up in this place months on end? The valley of your mind! Hah! The sump hole would be more like it. You haven't had an original thought in the last six months."

"You're so depraved," Marc said, rising to his own defense, "you wouldn't know an original thought if you saw one. And if you think I'm going to dedicate my days to the contemplation of smut, just for your sweet sake, you're mistaken. Just because you're nasty minded, doesn't mean the rest of us are."

"Why, you hypocritical old heller!" Toffee flared. "Some of the thoughts you've had were enough to singe the hair right off a censor's head. It makes me fairly blush sometimes, just being in the same mind with them."

"I've a fine picture of that!" Marc snorted. "You haven't got a modest blush left to your name."

Toffee shrugged her shoulders. "Anyway," she said "you

might at least have dreamed me up in time for the excitement this morning. The one morning in your dull life when something happens, and you keep me chained up in your subconscious!"

Marc's features suddenly fell into lines of deep meditation. The morning and its frantic adventures had gone completely out of his memory until now. Toffee's remarks had stirred vague remembrances. All of it was slowly coming back.

Toffee started toward him with sudden concern. "What's wrong, Marc?" she asked softly. "Is it anything I can help with? Even if you are a low viper, I still love you, you know. I guess I just can't help it."

Marc shook his head. "I don't quite know what's wrong myself," he said slowly. "That is, I know what's happened, but I don't know why."

"You sound a little mixed up."

"I am. All mixed up."

Then they both swung quickly around as an odd lapping sounded softly behind them. At the foot of the mound, the black tide was already rising swiftly toward them, each successive surge blotting out more and more of the little valley. For a moment, they just stood looking at it, too surprised to move.

"Here we go again," Toffee said happily, turning to Marc.

Her voice seemed to wake him from a sort of trance. "Go again?" he asked. "We?" A frightened look came into his eyes. "No! No, you don't. Things will be bad enough without you!"

"Oh, don't be silly," Toffee giggled. Then seeing that the speeding tide was already near their feet, she suddenly turned to Marc and swung her arms around his neck. "You need me."

"Let go!" Marc yelled. He ducked, tried to break her grasp, but it was no use. Then it was too late. All at once, the tide caught them up and hurled them toward the sky. And just as it seemed they were going to touch the clouds, there was a horrible sucking sound and they were drawn down into the inner current of the flowing blackness.

THE light of day returned to Marc slowly and without welcome. Partly opening one eye, he wished he hadn't, for his head instantly began pulsing like a heavily burden-

ed steam engine pulling out of a mountain way-station. Somewhere there was a faint, intermittent hissing sound, which Marc expected was probably caused by gases shooting rhythmically from his ears. He opened the other eye and tried to clear his head by concentration. But the hissing continued. He lay back and turned his attention to the restful blankness of the ceiling. When Toffee's pert, puckish face swam into view just above his own, he was only mildly surprised. After everything else, it seemed only to be expected.

"It's so lovely to be materialized again," she sighed happily. "I feel all alive and wonderful. I even begin to like you a little." Unmoved by these glad tidings, Marc nodded absently and closed his eyes again. "You look simply awful," she added.

"You wouldn't win any titles, yourself," Marc mumbled, "if you'd been kicked, pummeled and bashed all over town like I have."

"What happened? Who kicked you?"

Sitting up and holding his head in his hands, Marc tried to give her a brief and coherent summary of his havoc-ridden journey to the office. Also, he included the depressing welcome afforded him by his staff upon arrival.

"Very strange," Toffee mused, moving thoughtfully around the disordered room. "Something has obviously gone amiss."

"Amiss!" Marc groaned. "Something's gone completely berserk." Suddenly he stopped speaking, looked up, and inclined his head in a listening attitude. "Do you hear something?" he asked.

"That hissing sound?" Toffee said. "Gets on your nerves, doesn't it?"

"Thank heaven," Marc sighed. "I thought maybe it was in my head. What do you think it is?"

"Sounds like someone sleeping, breathing heavily," Toffee said. Then her roving eye lit on the half-filled bottle at the other end of the room, and she moved swiftly toward it. She started to reach down for it, then suddenly stopped, tilting her head to one side. "That noise is louder over here." She straightened and pointed to the chair beside the bottle. "It seems to be coming from that."

"Don't be silly," Marc said shortly. "Why would a chair hiss?"

Leaning down again, Toffee extended a slender finger,

and jabbed quickly at the cushion of the chair. Instantly, a horrible grunting sound echoed through the room, and she jumped back, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Good grief," a voice said thickly. "Haven't you any sense of decency at all? Keep your prodding fingers to yourself. Go exercise your low instincts somewhere else."

Toffee swung quickly around to face Marc. "This," she said sternly, "is no time to be sitting around throwing your voice. If you must give vaudeville entertainments, go to a cheap theatre where you vulgar talents will be appreciated."

Marc's face twisted with wonder. "I didn't throw anything," he said innocently. "Least of all my voice. But I heard it, and it was awful."

"It *was* your voice," Toffee insisted. "I'd know that rasp anywhere. And if you try just once more, I'll . . ." Suddenly her voice froze into silence as she saw Marc's expression swiftly change to one of undiluted horror. Slowly, she turned and followed his gaze to the garrulous chair, and promptly started back with a hysterical sob.

"Holy gee!" she breathed. "If that isn't the most hair-raising sight ever!"



Chapter 3

FROM the chair an apparently disembodied hand swung downward and grasped the bottle on the floor. Then, even as they watched it, it raised the bottle rakishly over the center of the chair and poured a portion of its contents into . . . into nothing! This done, the hand and bottle moved downward again, and a resounding burp rumbled messily through the room.

"Holy gee!" Toffee repeated breathlessly.

"What. . . what's. . ." The words died in Marc's throat.

The floating hand, now at rest on the arm of the chair, had suddenly been matched by another on the opposite arm. Marc and Toffee, struck dumb by this spectacle, remained rigid, staring with wide-eyed amazement. And as they watched, two feet, as though to add balance to the already gruesome picture, slowly appeared on the floor in front of the chair. After that things seemed to really get under way, and it was only a matter of seconds until, a section at a time, a whole body had come into view, complete with everything . . . except a head.

"Ulp!" The sound came from Marc.

"You said it," Toffee murmured. "I think I'm going to be hysterical." With a shudder she turned away and gazed intently out the window.

"You . . . you see it too?" Marc asked wretchedly.

"I'm doing my level best not to," Toffee replied. "It's the most horrible thing I've ever set my eyes on. It's positively haunting. I'd be just as pleased if you wouldn't remind me of it."

"What you you suppose it is?"

"I don't know," Toffee returned miserably. "And I don't care. I just want to forget all about it. Maybe if we simply ignore it, it will go away and leave us alone. Let's just look out the window and engage in casual conversation. Maybe it'll get the idea it's not wanted."

"I wonder if it *can* go away?" Marc said. Shakily he rose from the lounge, and with one last tormented glance at the headless figure, moved rapidly to Toffee's side. "Suppose it . . . it can't move . . . any more?"

"It can move all right," Toffee said gloomily. "The way it was whipping that bottle around I wouldn't be surprised to see it get up and start doing an Irish jig, though the mere thought of it makes my flesh fairly scamper."

"That's right," Marc mused. "Whatever it is, it seems to be in splendid working order."

"Too damn splendid," Toffee agreed.

"Maybe we should assert ourselves," Marc suggested. "Maybe we could throw it out."

"I, personally," Toffee replied firmly, would rather slash my wrists than lay a finger to that clammy thing."

"As I recall," a voice said hollowly from across the room, "you didn't mind in the least laying a finger to me a while ago. And a shocking intimate finger it was too. In fact, I was quite embarrassed by it. And if you two mental cases really want something to do, I suggest you open up that window and throw yourselves out into the street. Your feeble-minded gibbering is keeping me awake."

Marc and Toffee nearly collided as they swung about. Then, in perfect unison, they gasped. The figure, now graced with a head, was glaring at them evilly.

"Wha . . . who?" Marc sputtered. Turning away, slightly, he passed a trembling hand over his eyes, then looked again. "OOooo!" He looked like a man who'd just received a

ball bat across the stomach. The face into which he gazed was an exact duplicate of his own. It was like looking at his own reflection . . . only there wasn't a mirror.

"You," the figure observed dryly, "sound like a bilious Indian. For that matter you may be one, for all I know. But, in any case, if you can't say anythinug intelligent, please go away. I'm very tired."

THIS seemed to jolt Marc out of his state of temporary paralysis. With the air of one who had had quite enough, he stepped forward and leveled a long finger at the figure in the chair. "Who . . . who are you?" he asked.

"Why, I'm . . ." The figure turned and regarded Marc closely for the first time. A look of astonishment came into its face. "Who are *you*?" it countered suspiciously.

"I'm Marc Pillsworth," Marc returned impatiently. "This is my office. And whoever you are and whatever kind of trick you think you are playing, I'll thank you to clear out before I call the police and have you dragged out . . . er . . . bodily." He cleared his throat uneasily. "A section at a time if need be."

Suddenly the figure was on its feet, staring at Marc in unmixed alarm.

"You're lying," it said. You can't be Marc Pillsworth, I'm Marc Pillsworth . . . at least, in a sense I am." It turned to Toffee. "He isn't Marc Pillsworth, is he?"

"I thought he was," Toffee replied confusedly. "Now I'm not so sure. Right now, I don't even know who I am. Maybe I'm Marc Pillsworth and you two are Toffee. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if it turned out that way."

"He can't be!" the figure insisted. "Marc Pillsworth was due to die at eight-thirty sharp this morning." Suddenly it turned to Marc. "You're dead!" it said firmly. "You'd better stop running around like this. It isn't right. I was ordered here to haunt this place, and how can I do it with you around? It ruins everything. I'm a self-respecting spectre and I won't have this sort of thing. I won't."

"I'm not dead," Marc snapped peevishly. "And . . . and . . ." Suddenly he stopped short and blinked. "You . . . you're a ghost?"

"Naturally," the figure replied with solemn dignity. "Yours. What did you think? So you see, you simply can't be alive."

It just isn't possible. These thnigs just aren't handled that way."

Fearful uncertainty crept into Marc's eyes. "Well," he murmured. "I did have a lot of accidents this morning, and maybe I did . . . I don't feel so good." Suddenly he shook his head. "No! This is insane. I'm just as alive as ever."

"Holy smoke!" the figure cried. "You mean you loused things up and didn't get killed? You're actually here, you and that naked lady?"

Toffee drew her brief tunic closely around her. "Ghost or no ghost," she said icily, "I'll not be referred to as that naked lady."

The ghost looked at her appraisingly. "You may not be any lady," he said "but you are certainly naked."

"For heaven's sake!" Marc cried desperately. This is no time to be going on about naked ladies."

"It's as good a time as any," Toffee said pertly. "You stay out of this. It may develop into something interesting." Her hold on her tunic relaxed slightly. "Naked ladies don't grow on trees, you know."

"I don't care if they grow in ash cans!" Marc rasped, a little out of control. "I don't care about naked ladies at all!"

"You don't?" the ghost stared at Marc wonderingly.

"No. I don't. What I care about is this mess you've gotten me into. It's got to be straightened out!"

"Oh, that," the ghost said, suddenly unconcerned. "That's easy, now that I think about it. There was some sort of slip up this morning, but I'm sure it was all your own doing. Our office never makes mistakes. All you have to do now is just bump yourself off, and everything will be all right. Better late than never, I suppose."

"What!" The word shot from Marc's mouth like a handful of gravel. "You expect me to commit suicide just for the sake of your precious records! I never heard of anything so calous!"

"Oh, come now, old man," the spirit smiled blandly. "Let's not be sentimental about it. Why don't you just toddle down to the corner and slip quietly under a truck?" Suddenly he burped and his legs, in simultaneous accompaniment, disappeared up to his knees. For a moment he seemed to hover, half-legless, in mid-air. Looking down at this curious phenomenon, he smiled apologetically. "It's the liquor," he said,

"Can't handle my ectoplasm worth a damn when I'm drinking." Closing his eyes, he seemed to concentrate for a moment, and then the legs reappeared in their entirety. He looked up, beaming proudly.

"Oh, good grief," Toffee moaned. "As long as I live I'll never see anything worse than that!"

"And now," the spirit began, turning to Marc, "as I was saying . . ."

"No!" Marc looked like an animal at bay.

MOVING to the chair, the spirit sat down, crossed his legs and elegantly lifted the bottle from the floor. After a long swallow, he looked up and shook his head. "It's on the books that you're dead, and I've got my ectoplasm and a job to do. I don't care what you do, I'm going to stay and haunt this place." He crossed his arms defiantly over his chest.

Marc glanced up peevishly. "*Haunt* this place?" he said sarcastically. "A wrecking crew could do the same thing, if that's what you call it."

"It's the new method," the spirit said languidly. "The old-fashioned moaning and chain rattling is out nowadays. The new haunting manual tells us to just use our own imagination and initiative. You know, make the thing more personal through self-expression." He leaned forward and looked at Marc more closely. "Say, you don't look so good." He held out the bottle. "You better have some of this."

Marc accepted the bottle with hesitation, regarded it suspiciously for a moment, then, with a shrug, took a long drink. After savoring the taste and the feel of the liquid, he thoughtfully took another. . . and another.

"Let's not get greedy about this thing!" the spirit said with some show of alarm. "Let's not go overboard. That grog was hard come by. I had to hi-jack a delivery truck and nearly got a free ride to the next city."

"That would have been awful," Marc countered wryly. He returned the bottle and turned to Toffee. "You are naked," he mused. "Awfully naked. And things are complicated enough without it. 'Why don't you trot off and put on some clothes?'"

"And where do I get these clothes?"

Marc waved an expansive hand toward a door at the far



end of the room. "I think the boys were doing some models in there yesterday. There are probably some clothes left over."

"Good night!" Toffee said, scandalized. "What were those boys doing to the poor things. What, with clothes left over, it must have been awful."

"They were photographing them for ads."

"Oh," Toffee said disappointedly, and pivoting, went to the door. Opening it, she paused a moment to look back. "This won't take long. Don't go away." She stepped into the dimness of the next room, and softly closed the door.

Marc directed his attention back to the spirit. "Now there must be some way out of this, Mr. . . . uh . . ."

"Just call me George," the spirit said, "It's your second name, you know. You're already using the Marcus part of it yourself."

Marc nodded gravely. "Well, anyway, George, you must understand that this thing can't go any further." George yawned expansively, and Marc increased the volume of his voice "You've simply got to go. George I'm sure of that. . ."

His voice trailed off into the distant reaches of the room and faded into nothing. George had suddenly disappeared and a hollow snoring rattled ominously from the depths of the now empty-looking chair.

"In here, Miss McGuire?" The voice was Julie's and it came from just beyond the outer door.

Marc leaped to his feet in alarm, started frantically toward the chair, the door to the photographer's room, then, hopelessly,



he whirled about, threw himself down on the lounge and closed his eyes tight. Maybe if Julie thought he was sleeping, she would leave. There was the sound of a hand on the door knob.

The door whined open, and muted footsteps sounded on the carpet. From the sound of it, there seemed to be several people, among them a man. Marc wondered desperately who it was, but kept his eyes determinedly shut.

"There he is," came the sound of Memphis' voice, "just as I left him."

"Is that good, doctor?" This time it was Julie's voice, anxious and fearful.

"I really couldn't say, Mrs. Pillsworth. Maybe. Maybe not."

The doctor's voice was a solemn one with sonorous, church-like overtones.

"Well, I'll leave you two with him," Memphis said. "I hope everything will be all right."

"Thanks so much for calling me," Julie returned.

As the door closed with a snap, Marc struggled valiantly against a driving impulse to open his eyes . . . one of them at least . . . just a little.

"Smell the liquor, doctor?" Julie was saying. "This sort of thing has never happened before. I just don't understand it. If what Miss McGuire tells me is true, he's been behaving like a regular hoodlum."

"Sometimes," the doctor replied, "they just snap all of a sudden. There's no telling what sets them off at all. It might be anything."

The footsteps came closer and Marc felt a hand on his shoulder. It shook him gently. "Wake up, dear," Julie's voice cooed. "It's Julie."

MARC opened his eyes and looked up guiltily. Julie's anxious face was just above his own, smiling a tragic little smile. And just beyond her shoulder there was also the face of a man, studious and intelligent in a musty, smug sort of way. Marc disliked it on sight.

"Do you feel very awful?" Julie asked.

Marc nodded. "Yes, dear," he murmured wanly. "Terrible."

Her hand patted his shoulder reassuringly. "Well, every-

thing's going to be all right," she said. "I've brought Dr. Polk to see you. He wants to talk to you."

Marc's thoughts raced wildly as he boosted himself into a sitting position.

He glanced nervously at the chair across the room and the door behind which Toffee was dressing. The situation, he felt was almost too atomic to be endured. It might explode at any minute if he didn't get Julie and the doctor out of there. He regarded the doctor with mistrust.

"I don't want to talk to him," he said peevishly.

Undismayed, the doctor calmly sat down on the edge of the lounge. "You mustn't feel that way, Mr. Pillsworth," he said soothingly. "We're going to be great friends, you and I."

"Want to bet?" Marc scowled. He turned to Julie "What kind of quack is this guy, anyway?"

"Dr. Polk is a . . . a . . ."

"I'm a psychiatrist," the doctor broke in. "You're suffering from a nervous disorder, Mr. Pillsworth, and I'm here to help you."

Marc's eyes widened with astonishment. They thought he was nuts! What was he . . . ! His mind leaped to other things as the hissing noise from George's chair suddenly increased in volume. They were bound to notice it in a moment.

"I'm all right, doctor," Marc said, his voice unnaturally loud. "I'm perfectly okay. So you see, I don't really need you! It was just a little joke. Hah, Hah!" His laugh was false and a little hysterical. "So you can run along back to your nuts . . . ah . . . patients." He glanced nervously at the door of the photographer's room. Everything was ominously quiet. The hissing from George's chair had stopped.

The doctor cleared his throat, glanced significantly at Julie. "Well, yes," he said, edging closer to Marc. "I'll run along. But I want you to answer a few simple questions for me first. Is that all right?"

"Sure! Sure," Marc said feverishly. "I'll answer your questions. Only make it fast, doctor. I'm a busy man, you know."

"All right," the doctor said, taking a pencil from his pocket and carefully spreading a notebook on one knee. "I'm going to give you a list of words and I want you to give me the first response that comes to your mind. Understand."

"Sure, doctor," Marc replied. "You say a word and I come

back at you with the first thing it reminds me of. Only hurry, will you?"

"Fine." The doctor poised the pencil over the notebook. "Now this is the first word. Black."

"Future," Marc answered absently, gazing fearfully at George's chair.

"Hot," the doctor continued.

"Seat," Marc replied, still absorbed in the chair.

"Cut."

"Throat."

"Door."

Marc glanced frightenedly at the door to the photographer's room. "Closed!" he yelled, taking advantage of the situation. "Keep the door closed!"

The doctor turned worriedly to Julie. "These are very strange responses, Mrs. Pillsworth," he said. "Frankly, I don't know what to make of them. There's some sort of anxiety complex here that's not quite clear."

"Ask half-witted questions and you get half-witted answers."

The voice was Marc's but still it hadn't come from Marc, though it appeared to. Obviously George was awake and entering into the spirit of things again. Marc's gaze went wild and finally stopped at the chair. It was still empty.

"What did you say?" the doctor asked politely, turning back to Marc.

"I said," the voice broke out again, "that I wish you would get the hell out of here and leave me alone. If I have to listen to you any longer, I'll probably get sick all over myself."



Chapter 4

THE doctor stared at Marc, his face heavy with incredulity. "Now," he whispered, "he's talking without even moving his lips."

"Marc Pillsworth!" Julie put in severely. "I don't care if you are sick, you can at least be civil."

"Oh, stop your silly yapping," the voice returned. "You're no seasick remedy, yourself."

"What!" Julie's blue eyes were suddenly as hard as ice and twice as chilly. The very sight of them put icicles on Marc's spine.

"I didn't mean it!" he cried. "I mean I didn't say it!"

"You've made your bed," Julie snapped. "Don't try to lie out of it."

It was at this juncture that the door to the photographer's room suddenly started to open. But it didn't open all the way, just a crack.

"Oh, Marc!" Toffee's happy voice trilled. "Just wait till you get a look at me in this. I'm a scandal to the jaybirds!"

Toffee, in a whimsical mood, had apparently decided to make her entrance a memorable one. Instead of swinging the

door all the way open, and walking into the room as anyone else would have, she held it open just enough to allow the seductive passage of one exquisite lace-clad leg. "That," she called, "is only a promise of things to come. There ought to be music to go with this."

Julie, who had remained transfixed up to this point, suddenly came to life with a vengeance. "I'll give you something to go with it, you little tramp," she raged. "How about a fracture!" She started toward the door, but reached it too late. Already it had slammed to, and there was the sound of a key being turned in the lock. She pounded on the panel with both fists.

"Come out of there, you little sneak!" she yelled.

"Go away," Toffee's voice came back demurely. "I'm dressing."

Julie kicked the door in a fit of frustration. "You little . . . little . . . social leper!" she fumed.

"What was that!" Toffee called back, anger rising suddenly in her voice.

"What did you call me?"

"Leper!" Julie screamed. "Leper! Social leper!"

"Oh," Toffee's voice was suddenly mollified. "I thought you said lecher."

"Take it either way," Julie shot back. "It won't make any difference what you are when I get hold of you!" She swung around to Marc. "Let's hear you explain that!" she demanded menacingly, pointing to the door. She moved toward him. "Stand up, Marc Pillsworth." Her voice was deceptively quiet now. "Stand up so I can knock you down. I'm going to lay you out colder than a cast iron cuspidor, you philanderer!"

"But . . . but," Marc searched for something to say against desperate odds. "What . . . what about our marriage?" he asked lamely.

"Marriage!" Julie snorted. "From now on, this isn't marriage, it's mayhem! Prop him up, doctor, and stand back!"

Marc was stunned. The transformation in Julie was almost unbelievable. He'd seen her angry before, but never this angry. Apparently the old jealousy that he'd thought cured had merely been lying dormant all the while. Now it was all the worse for having been suppressed. He got slowly to his feet, without quite realizing he was doing it. He stared at Ju-

lie in blank amazement.

"That's the good boy," Julie approved nastily. "Now just hold it." Moving swiftly to Marc's desk, she picked up a heavy ornate inkwell. Raising it over her head, she sighted a target squarely between Marc's bewildered eyes.

"Stop!" Dr. Polk was suddenly at her side, grasping her arm. "You mustn't do that, madam," he cried "Your husband is a sick man."

"He's going to be a lot sicker when I get through with him," Julie grated. "The rip has probably been around revelling behind my back all the time."

She continued to rage. But she became so absorbed in an analytical description of Marc and all his forbears, she wasn't aware of the doctor removing the inkwell from her hand and leading her toward the door. It was unfortunate, though, that in passing George's chair her foot fell against the bottle standing beside it. For a moment the bottle teetered dangerously, then righted itself as though of its own will.

"Pick up your clumsy wedgies, tanglefoot," came George's voice. "What are you trying to do, trample the place down?"

MIRACULOUSLY, the doctor managed to pull Julie out of the office. But he didn't get the door closed in time to ward off her final shriek of outrage. It was enough to sear the paint from the walls.

"I'll see you in court, Marc Pillsworth!" she yelled.

The minute the door closed Marc leaped for George's chair. Groping for the spirit, he was rewarded with a foolish giggle.

"Stop it!" George tittered foolishly. "You tickle!"

Marc's hand finally came in contact with what seemed to have the general feel of an arm. He tugged at it. "Get up," he commanded. "We're getting out of here."

"Where we going?" George's voice asked.

"I don't know," Marc sighed wearily. "Anywhere. Come on!"

The arm rose under his hand and the bottle beside the chair suddenly darted into the air and remained there, lazily suspended. Reassured, Marc moved away, and the bottle followed. At the door to the photographer's room, he knocked. "Come on out!" he called. "They're gone. We've got to get out of here before they come back."

A key scraped in the lock, and the door inched warily

open. Finally, Toffee's head appeared in the opening. "What happened?" she asked innocently.

"What a time you picked to play footsie!" Marc groaned reprovingly. "Come on, let's go."

The door opened and Toffee stepped out, a wayward vision in a black lace negligee. The garment, inspired by the peek-a-boo idea, had been translated by Toffee's lovely figure into a wide open stare. In terms of visibility, the ceiling was practically unlimited.

A low whistle generated from the vicinity of the dangling bottle at Marc's side. But Marc's own reaction was somewhat varied.

"Good night," he said. "Did you *have* to pick that? It's darned near the nakedest thing I've ever seen. It's indecent."

"Thanks," Toffee said sweetly. "I knew you'd like it." She fell into a languorous pose beside the door. "By the way, what is the nakedest thing you've ever seen? It might be interesting to know."

"You and your evil mind," Marc sneered. "Anyway, we haven't time for that. We've got to get out of here." He grabbed Toffee by the arm and shoved her toward the door at the rear of the office. "We can go down the fire escape into the parking lot. Julie probably left the car there, and we'll need it."

Toffee continued to the door, opened it and passed through, holding her lacies daintily away from the floor. "I'll bet it wasn't the naked truth," she murmured reflectively.

ON THE summit, under the roseate glow of a pink-and-lavender sunset, it was even conceivable that life could be beautiful. Scented breezes played wantonly among the pines. Everything dwelt under a spell of hushed loveliness there. That was before the blue convertible charged onto the scene in a heavy cloud of dust and dark words.

The car seemed almost in the throes of a spasm. Appearing to paw the pavement with its tires like a live and avenging thing, it sighted the nearest pine and charged it headlong. Then, at the last possible moment, it veered in the opposite direction and transferred its attack to the guard rail on the far side of the road. Rushing to the brink, it peered momentarily into the canyon below, hastily reconsidered, and reeled back to safety, its tires screaming with fright. Then, its pas-

sions apparently expended, it came to a sudden, jolting halt. Everything was quiet, except for a loud, hissing sound.

Marc's voice was shaken, but nonetheless sincere. "You ever do anything like that again," he said heavily, "and I'll wring your ectoplasmic neck. Now we've got a flat."

On the other side of the car, George, now fully materialized, sighed resignedly and leaned his head back against the cushions. "I don't see why you're making such a stink about it," he said drowsily. "Why don't you just try looking at this thing from my side for a change? After all, you've got to pop off sometime. Now, just one good twist of that wheel and everything would be over in a second. Splat!"

Marc winced as George's hands slapped together. The word "splat" was too descriptive. "Wouldn't you know it?" he lamented. "Wouldn't you know that my own ghost would turn out to be a homicidal drunk? Why can't you be satisfied with just ruining my life? Isn't that enough?"

George shrugged, and reaching for the bottle at his side, helped himself to a long drink. Winking at Toffee, who was seated between him and Marc, he burped and vanished completely. "My head aches," his voice come back dispassionately from space. And almost at once soft shoring began to issue from his side of the car.

"I shouldn't wonder his head aches," Toffee mused. "He's the most loaded spirit I've ever seen." She giggled. "A spirit full of spirits."

"This," Marc said sourly, "is no time to crack bum jokes." He opened the car doof and stepped out onto the road. "I'll have to change that tire."

A moment later, business-like scrapings and clankings in the rear of the car announced that Marc had set to work. Toffee leaned back and gazed absently out of the window. There wasn't much to see, only a lot of trees and bushes. And everything, to her way of thinking, was entirely too quiet. For a time she toyed with the idea of rousing George, but finally decided against it.

Then there was a faint rustling sound and Toffee glanced up to see a man scurrying out of the bushes at the side of the road. He was old, except for his eyes, which were remarkably blue and clear, though rather eclipsed by two enormous shaggy eyebrows. The rest of his face was nothing more than a tangle of yellowish grey hair, for there was no telling where

his hair left off and his beard began. His clothes were in such a state of disintegration as to make them unattractive to street urchins in sub-zero weather.

"Howdy," the old fellow rasped. He locked a bony hand over the edge of the car door and peered at Toffee near-sightedly.

"Howdy," Toffee replied, glad even for this diversion. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wonderin'," the old fellow said with sudden shyness, "if you'd like some squeezin'?"

Toffee started visibly. "Aren't you being a little bit direct?" she asked coolly. "Do I look like the sort who would be interested in your squeezings?"

"They're mighty good," the old fellow went on hopefully. "I'll let you have 'em at a bargain, too."

"What!" There was a real shock in Toffee's voice. "You expect me to pay for these . . . ah.. . squeezings, as you so quaintly call them?"

"Naturally," the old man nodded. "Can't give 'em away, you know."

"I should think not!" Toffee cried. "Not to me, you couldn't. I wouldn't have them if you paid me."

"I could give you a sample," the old fellow offered. His smile was starkly toothless.

TOFFEE edged quickly away. "No, thank you," she said loftily. "In fact, I'd really rather not hear any more about it. Why don't you just take your filthy-minded squeezings and slither back in to the bushes where you came from? For my part, I'll just sit here and try to forget everything you've said."

"Well, okay," the old man said sadly, "but you don't know what you're missin'."

He started to turn away, but Toffee suddenly held out a restraining hand. It was too late now. She was already intrigued. Maybe there was something here she should know about. "Wait," she said, lowering her voice. "If you can tell me in a nice way, what's so terrific about these squeezings of yours?"

"They send you clean outa this world," the old man grinned. "Just a little bit, and you won't even know what hit you."

Toffee frowned. "It seems you could be a little more modest about it," she reproved. "Aren't you married?"

"Oh, Lord, yes," the old man sighed wearily.

"Doesn't your wife mind you running around, doing all this squeezing?"

"Naw. The old lady helps me."

"What!" Toffee looked horrified. "You mean she's mixed up in this squeezing business too!"

"Sure. Her and the whole family."

"Oh, my gosh!" Toffee moaned. "This is too much. I suppose it shows a nice enterprising spirit on the part of you and your family, but isn't it all a little hard to get used to?"

The old man shook his head. "Don't know why it should be," he mused. "You city people sure do get some strange notions in your heads."

"We don't hold a candle to you country people," Toffee retorted. "But I suppose, being up here alone and all, squeezings do begin to take on a certain importance after awhile."

"That's right," the old man agreed. "They're mighty comfortin' on a cold night. Mighty nice when everyone's scrouged up around the fire."

"Scrouged up?" Toffee asked timidly. "You mean you have to be scrouged up for these squeezings?"

Marc suddenly appeared at the opposite window, wiping his hands on a rag with an air of finality. He regarded the old man mildly. "What can I do for you, old timer?" he asked.

"For heaven's sake!" Toffee cried imploringly. "Don't ask him!"

"What?" Marc stared at her questioningly.

"The old boy's as daffy as a snowball in July," Toffee whispered. "He's wild on the idea of going around squeezing people. He claims it's more darned fun. Says he has some sort of new technique or something where people get all scrouged up, whatever that means. He started harping about it the minute he got his nose out of those bushes. It's the worst thing I've ever listened to."

"I saw you folks stopped down here," the old man put in, "and I thought you might like some real mountain squeezin's. How about it, mister?"

"You see!" Toffee cried. "He's off on it again. Him and his squeezings! It's likely that if I have to listen to any more about either of them I'll be a gibbering idiot."

The old man looked distressed. "I think there's some-

thin' serious wrong with that gal," he told Marc regretfully. "I didn't want to tell her to her face, but she's too excitable. She got all skitterish because I tried . . . "

"And who wouldn't get skitterish," Toffee snapped, "with old gophers leering out of the bushes, trying to squeeze them? It's enough to unbalance anyone."

"I didn't try to squeeze you, lady," the old man retorted with unexpected heat. "And I didn't leer neither."

Anger suddenly flared in Toffee's green eyes. "Don't you try to deny it, you old hayseed!" she yelled. "I remember every word you said."



Chapter 5

MARC rushed into the breach. "Stop this wrangling," he commanded. "Let's get to the bottom of this thing." He turned to the old man. "Did you or did you not try to . . . ah . . . squeeze this young lady?"

"At my age?" the old man asked forlornly. "What do you think? I just came down here to sell you folks some corn squeezin's. I didn't know I was goin' to make all this trouble. Now I just want to forget the whole thing and go away. I think I'll go into the hog business."

"Corn squeezings?" Marc asked. "What's that?"

"It's a kind of likker," the old man said uninterestedly, as though it really didn't matter any more. "I make it myself. I got a still up yonder on the mountain. Right now I'm goin' up there and lay into the damn thing with a sledge hammer."

"Oh," Toffee breathed embarrassedly. "So that's all it was!" She reached a hand to Marc's sleeve. "Maybe we ought to buy some of his . . ." she shied away from the word, "that stuff. Just to make it up to him. It seems the least we can do."

Marc nodded and turned to the old man. "Don't take it so hard, old timer," he said sympathetically. "You just made a sale the hard way."

It was some time before Marc and Toffee emerged from the woods and started down the hill toward the car. Leaving the shadows of the great pines, they stepped into a path of shimmering bright moonlight. Over one shoulder, Marc carried an old-fashioned jug, and his face had rather a wooden look about it, though it was set in a blissful smile. Toffee moved loose-jointedly along at his side, softly singing a song about a girl named Lil who had suffered a rather devastating fall from grace at a shockingly early age. They moved lightly and silently down the hillside like a pair of enchanted shadows. It was just as they were approaching the car that Marc suddenly stopped and grasped Toffee's arm.

"You hear voices?" he whispered thickly.

Toffee leaned forward in a listening attitude. "I think so," she said, "but they may be in my head." She leaned forward again, and after a moment, nodded vigorously. A voice that sounded like a bucksaw drawn across a block of cement was coming from somewhere on the other side of the car.

"I looked everywhere, Marge," it said, "but I ain't seen nothin'."

"But I *hear* it," a feminine voice replied. "It sounded like it's somewhere inside the car."

The woman's voice was the perfect mate to the one that had spoken first; it was as husky as an acre of Iowa corn.

"It's the most gruesome thing I've ever heard," the first voice continued. "What'll we do?"

"Look again. Whatever it is, it must be sufferin' somethin' awful."

The golden beam of a flashlight suddenly stretched out over the hood of the car, then moved back swiftly toward the interior. Marc started forward. "Company," he murmured happily. Then he called out; "Hello, there!"

Two startled faces instantly appeared over the top of the car. They were quite distinct in the bright moonlight. One was large and hard looking like a product of Bethlehem Steel. The other was small, but all the worse for hard wear. Surrounded by a mop of gauzy blond hair, its makeup had been ladled on by a hand that was more lavish than loving. The owner of the large, hard head was the first to speak.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

"From heaven," Marc answered inanely. "That's what my folks said."

"Holy smoke!" the man said, turning to his companion. "Marge! Look at that dame! She ain't got nothin' on but a bunch of holes and a lot of skin!"

"Watch your temperature, Pete," Marge replied menacingly. "Remember what happened when I caught you with that blonde in Des Moines?"

PETE was immediately subdued. He fastened his eyes on Marc and carefully kept them there. By this time Marc and Toffee had reached the car and were moving toward the newcomers. The pair with the flashlight seemed to regard them with suspicion.

"You hillbillies?" the man named Pete asked. It was the forlorn conversational effort of a subnormal personality.

"Hah!" It was Marge who spoke up. "Just look at that dame, Pete. Does she make you think of hillbillies?"

"She makes me think of a lot of things," Pete answered promptly.

"Look, sister," Marge said, turning to Toffee. "You better clear outa here. You and me, we're goin' to tangle if you don't."

"Just because the boy shows a little good taste?" Toffee asked archly.

"He's got taste," Marge retorted, "like a mouthful of quinine."

"That must be why he got mixed up with you," Toffee said sweetly. "I understand there are things written on wash-room walls about dames like you."

Marge made a small snarling noise, then lunged toward Toffee. "Oh, what a fresh babe!" she screamed. "I oughta belt you one. We'll just see how smart you are. I'll rip that sleezy dress right off your back!"

Toffee ducked quickly behind Marc. "You rip off this dress," she giggled, "and you'll see a whale of a lot more than how smart I am."

That one stopped Marge cold. A naked redhead was bound to create more of a disturbance in Pete's life than just a fresh one dressed in lace. She was forced to content herself with only a murderous glare, but she put her all into it.

Marc, who had been watching these developments with an air of detached amusement, stepped forward, removing Toffee's protection. "You're all upset," he said to Marge, lowering the jug from his shoulder. "Have some squeezin's."

"Say," Marge drawled in a voice that was not altogether displeased, "are you tryin' to make a pass at me?"

"It's liquor," Marc said amiably. "It hits the spot."

"Oh," Marge accepted the jug, tilted it and took a long, accomplished swallow. "Wow!" she gasped. "That stuff not only hits the spot, mister, it completely demolishes it. I bet my breath is radioactive."

Marc took the jug from her and turned it over to Pete, who drank from it deeply without so much as a tremor. When the jug was returned, Marc put it on the ground. "Say," he said you two were looking for something when we came along. Can we help? What was it?"

"The owner of this here car," Pete said. "We can hear him snorin' in there, but I'm damned if we can find him."

"I told you," Marge put in argumentatively. "That ain't nothin' human that's makin' that noise. Leastways, it ain't nothin' that would own a car."

"You're nuts," Pete retorted. "That's somebody sleepin' in there."

For a moment they paused and listened. George's snoring was swiftly building to a stirring crescendo. It sounded like a sawmill in mid-season.

"Oh that!" Marc laughed, "That's George. He's my. . . uh . . . my dog. I keep him locked in the back."

"You mean this here is yore car?" Pete asked.

"Sure," Marc patted the car fondly. "All mine."

Pete glanced at Marge. "Shall we do it?"

"Yeah," Marge said, helping herself to the jug. "We ain't got all night."

MARC and Toffee watched interestedly as Pete wedged an immense hand into his coat pocket and set it into a complicated series of fumbling motions. Presently, the hand seemed to locate what it was searching for and emerged once more into the bright moonlight. It was holding a gun.

"Put up your hands," Pete growled, "before I blow your heads off." Then he glanced at Marge uncertainly. "Is that right?" he asked.

The blonde nodded. "You could put more guts into it, maybe, but it'll do in this case."

Pete nodded with satisfaction and turned back to Marc. "Will you give me the keys to this here car, please?" he asked politely. "Me and Marge, here, are goin' to steal it, if it's all the same to you."

"Oh, for the love of Mike!" Marge snorted disgustedly. "Now you've went and messed it all up. Don't be so polite. How many times do I have to tell you? And don't ever say please. Tell 'em to hand over the keys and no funny business. Make it sound professional. When you're snatchin' a valuable article like a car, the victim's entitled to a first class hold-up with plenty of rough talk. Please, he says! What're people gonna think?"

Pete grinned at Marc apologetically. "Marge is coachin' me," he said. "She's learnin' me the profession. Only I'm kinda dumb. I always louse up."

"Oh, I don't know," Toffee put in kindly. "I don't think you were so bad. I think a bit of politeness in a stick up lends a refreshing note. It's original."

"See, Marge!" Pete said triumphantly. "Did you hear? I'm original."

"You're the original dope," Marge snapped. "I don't care what she says, we're stickin' to standard methods. If they were good enough for my old lady, they're good enough for me. Now get them keys and let's blow."

For a moment Pete looked crestfallen. "Sometimes," he murmured, "I wish I was just a juvenile delinquent again." Then with a sigh he jammed the gun into Marc's ribs. "Hand over them keys, buddy," he snarled. "And no funny business, see?"

Marc turned unconcernedly to Marge. "I like the other way better too," he said. "It's got more class."

"Who's runnin' this stick-up?" Marge said angrily. "Do I tell you your business? 'This is what I get for messin' with amateurs.'"

"Aw, Marge," Pete pleaded. "You ought'n to talk like that I'm tryin' hard to do like you tell me."

"Sure," Toffee broke in. Anyone can see he's sincere, and that's the important thing. Anyone who's sincere is bound to get ahead. You'll be proud of Pete someday. He may get to Sing Sing before you do, yourself."

"You stay out of this," Marge rasped, nearly at the end of her rope. "He's my boy friend, and I'll train him my way."

"What do you want the car for?" Marc asked, brushing Pete's gun gently away from his side. "Do you really need it, or are you just practicing?"

"We need the thing," Marge said wearily, tears of bitter humiliation beginning to well in her eyes. "We were makin' a getaway, our heap broke down about a mile back. We gotta get outa here, mister. Honest. Now, Won't you please co-operate and let Pete stick you up?"

"Sure," Marc said agreeably. "Stick me up, Pete."

"What about us?" Toffee asked suddenly. "We need the car too."

"Yeah," Pete said, gesturing at Marge with his gun. "What about them?"

Marge threw her hand up in a gesture of despair. "That rips it!" she wailed.

"I don't care what about anything anymore. You're all nuts . . . or drunk . . . or both." She sat down heavily on the running board and cupped her chin dejectedly in her hands. "Things have sure gone all to hell!"

A thoughtful silence fell over the little group for a time. Marc was the first to speak. "I tell you what," he said brightly. "We'll all go together. Toffee and I were only looking for a place to stay. You two come along with us, and when we find a place we like, you can stick us up all over again and steal the car. How's that?"

Pete smiled hopefully at Marge. "Yeah, Marge," he said. "That's fair, ain't it? And on the way out you could coach me some more so's I'll do it right, the way you want it. I'll really stick 'em up this time, too. I'll scare hell outa 'em."

"Oh, all right," Marge said resignedly. "But if I wake up in a padded cell tomorrow, I ain't ever goin' to ask how I got there."

Silently, the little party arranged itself in the car. Marge followed Pete into the back seat, scowling sullenly. Hugging the jug to her, Toffee slid across the front seat to make room for Marc behind the wheel. As she did so, the snoring, that had grown in intensity, was suddenly interrupted by a loud snort.

"If that was my dog," Marge said bitterly, "I'd strangle the beast."

WHEN Marc turned off the ignition, the convertible seemed to sigh with relief . . . so did the occupants of the back seat. Otherwise, everything was quiet. George's snoring had stopped completely some minutes before.

"Oh, Moses!" Marge murmured faintly. "Now, when they say death rides the highways, I'll know who they're talkin' about." She tugged at Pete's sleeve. "And did you see that jug floatin' around up there all by itself?"

"You're just excited, Marge," Pete told her soothingly. "You didn't see nothin' like that." He turned to Marc pleadingly. "She didn't see no jug floatin' around up there, did she, mister?"

But Marc didn't answer. He and Toffee were concerned with a light glowing through the pines just a few yards away from the road. Finally, Marc opened the door and got out of the car.

"I can't tell what it is," he said, "but I'll see if they can't put us up for the night." He moved away in the direction of the glowing light.

It was several minutes later when Marc, followed by a balding little relic of a day gone by, retraced his steps through the open door and stepped onto the antiquated veranda of Sunnygarden Lodge . . . "A Haven For The Weary."

"You needn't come along," he said uneasily to the little man. "My friends are waiting in the car. I can get them myself."

"Oh, but I insist!" the little fellow piped in a managerial voice. "I always greet each and every guest at Sunnygarden Lodge personally. I just wouldn't forgive myself if they came in without a personal welcome."

Marc hurried down the steps as though trying to lose the little manager. "My friends won't mind if you don't welcome them," he said. "They won't care at all. In fact, I'm sure they'd rather you wouldn't bother."

"Tut, tut!" the manager clung doggedly to Marc's side. "I like to know my guests. I take it as a sort of responsibility. As a rule, my guests are rather elderly and come regularly for the quiet. I like to make sure that any newcomers are . . . uh . . . well, compatible. Courtesy of the house, you know."

Reaching the drive, Marc started energetically down the center, hoping the manager would tire of the pace and drop out. But falling into a sort of jittery dog-trot, the fellow tagged

persistently along. It was just as they were rounding the first curve by the corner of the lodge that the blast of the horn suddenly shattered the stillness, and the blue convertible bounded into sight. Headlight beams searched wildly through the pines for a second, then fell to the graveled drive and stabbed forward.

Marc and the manager stood transfixed as the car bore down upon them. Then, just in time, Marc reached out, hugged the little man to him, and leaped to the safety of the lawn. The car raced past in a flash, but not so fast that it did not disclose several disconcerting facts, not the least of which was the empty space in the driver's seat. Apparently driverless, the car streaked by, the wail of its horn horribly augmented by terrified shrieks from the back seat. In startling contrast to all this, Toffee leaned gayly out of the window, opposite the wheel, and blew Marc a hurried kiss. Coming abreast of the veranda a split second later, the car came to a sudden, jarring stop, spitting gravel to the winds like rice at a wedding. A final blast from the horn announced the completion of these demented operations, and everything suddenly fell into a deep, throbbing silence.

"Oh, my heavens!" the little manager gasped. "Oh!"

"I . . . I can't imagine what happened," Marc faltered lamely.

"I don't think my guests will like this," the manager said reprovingly.

Together, Marc and the manager made their way back to the veranda. The door, on Toffee's side of the car, was just starting to open, and Marc made a dash for it. Arriving just as Toffee placed the first slender foot on the drive, he reached inside the car, drew out a plaid lap robe and draped it over her like a piece of wet wash.

"Hey!" Toffee cried. "What's the big idea?"



Chapter 6

MARC turned and smiled wanly at the manager who was now standing on the lodge steps. Looking back at Toffee, his smile faded. "I wanted to be sure you wouldn't catch cold," he hissed. "Now, keep it on."

Marge's voice sounded weakly behind them. "Outa my way," she whimpered, fairly crawling from the car. Like the survivor of the wreck, she stumbled forward a few steps and turned baleful eyes toward the manager. "Shove a stretcher under me, pops," she gasped. "I think I'm going to pass out."

The words of welcome that had been determinedly forming on the manager's lips froze there like an epitaph in granite. Then they vanished together at the sudden appearance of Pete. The big man lumbered blindly out of the car, his momentum carrying him half up to the steps of the lodge. Then he whirled abruptly, sat down, and put his head in his hands.

"It ain't worth it," he mourned. "I'm going straight."

"Aren't you going to steal the car?" Toffee asked disappointedly.

Marge looked up ruefully. "Wild horses couldn't drag me

back into that car," she said.

Meanwhile, Marc, staring inside the car, had stiffened in an attitude of panic-stricken fascination. The jug, that had been resting on the seat, had suddenly jumped into the air and was floating lightly out, through the opposite door. It wasn't until it had jauntily traversed the entire front half of the car and started to emerge around the edge of the right fender that the horrible possibilities of the situation suddenly bore down on Marc and pressed him into action. Leaping forward, he grasped the jug around the base and tugged at it. Hearing a gasp behind him, he glanced back over his shoulder and discovered that everyone, and especially the manager, was watching him with consuming interest. He grinned sheepishly and turned back to the matter of the jug.

With a defiant gurgle the jug immediately started to put up a fight. Shooting out of his hands like a live thing, it darted coily behind him. He whirled and caught hold of it, just as it started to slip out of reach.

"Give me that thing," he rasped.

"You're always so greedy," George's voice came back. "If you want a drink so bad, why don't you just ask for it like a gentleman?"

"Good heavens!" the manager exclaimed from the steps. "Is he actually arguing with that thing?"

Marc wrenched the jug free and clutched it firmly to his side. "I lost my balance," he said self-consciously. "Gravel's slippery."

"Is it?" the manager asked coolly. He cleared his throat with an effort. "Well, if we are all ready, we'll go inside, shall we?" He glanced back at Marc disapprovingly. "Our guests," he added warningly, "do very little drinking here."

MARC awoke and instantly regretted it. Horrible memories of the previous day's events trampled each other in a rush for his attention. His head ached and his feet felt oddly heavy and immovable. He groaned and propped himself forward with his hands, then he groaned again. No wonder his feet felt heavy. Toffee was sitting on his ankles.

"I don't know how just one man can look so awful," she said lightly. I should think it would take at least two . . . maybe three."

"What're you doing here?" Marc asked thickly. "Go 'way."

"And a happy good morning to you, too." Toffee slid quickly toward him and brushed cool lips across his forehead. "You scare me," she laughed. Then, suddenly quitting him, she moved across the room to consider herself critically in the bureau mirror. "I don't know why you went to the trouble of getting me a room of my own," she murmured, running her fingers lightly through her hair. "You know very well I wouldn't get any use of it. I can stay materialized only when I'm projected through your consciousness. When you go to sleep, I have to return to your subconscious until you wake up."

"Haven't you ever heard of decency?" Marc asked.

Toffee nodded. "I've heard talk of it. But nothing interesting."

Marc shook his head sadly. "Where are George and those two criminal types we picked up last night?"

"How should I know?" Toffee shrugged. "Probably downstairs, stuffing themselves at your expense. That's what I'd be doing. It's nearly ten o'clock."

"Holy smoke!" Marc cried. "Is it that late? You mean those maniacs are probably running around loose down there?" He swung his long legs out over the edge of the bed. "Get out of here so I can dress."

Toffee started slowly toward the door. "Puritan," she said chidingly.

Marc looked up, startled. In daylight, in the lace dress, Toffee's exquisite body seemed merely to be passing through a lightly shaded bower, completely unclothed. Clutching a sheet to him, he jumped up, pulled a scarf from a nearby table and threw it to her.

"Here!" he called. "Put that on!"

Catching the scarf, Toffee held it out at full length. "It's not big enough to do much good, is it?" she asked innocently.

"Use it strategically!" Marc sighed, "where it will do the most good."

Draping the scarf lightly over her shoulders, Toffee left the room.

ONLY minutes later, still needing a shave, Marc joined Toffee in the hallway. Together, they hurried downstairs and made their way directly to the dining room. Toffee had guessed right. Across the room, at a corner table, were George, Marge and Pete. Of the three, George was the only one fac-

ing in their direction and he was so busy talking he didn't notice them.

George had done a good job of materializing . . . except for one little detail. His trouser legs terminated in two gaping holes. One leg crossed jauntily over the other, he was nonexistent from the ankles down. The explanation for the oversight probably lay in the jug nestled next to the leg of his chair.

In a chair that was almost back-to-back with George's, a little white-haired lady was nearly twisting her frail neck double in an effort to have a better view of George's footless legs. Passing a trembling hand over her eyes, she shuddered with horror and finally turned away. Across the table from her, her elderly male companion cast her a questioning glance, but she ignored it and stared determinedly out the window. Her thin, colorless lips were silently forming the words: "I won't. I won't. I *won't* look again!"

It was apparent at a glance that the entire clientele at Sunnycarden Lodge hovered dangerously close to the grave. Wheel chairs, crutches, and ear aids were much in evidence in the hushed funereal atmosphere of the dining room that was only occasionally interrupted by the inadvertent clatter of a slipping denture. In contrast, however, a lively, greying woman in a comic-opera gypsy costume moved from table to table, at the far end of the room, with hateful persistence, like a bee searching for honey in a cluster of toadstools.

Toffee nudged Marc and pointed to the woman. "What's that?" she asked.

"A fortune teller," Marc said absently. "They always have them in dumps like this. They're considered quaint by the older set. She generalizes about your future at a buck a throw."

He started across the room, and Toffee followed. As they drew near the table in the corner, George suddenly glanced up for the first time and saw them. Blanching, he hurriedly handed Pete a piece of paper, then got quickly up from his chair and started away. By the time Marc and Toffee reached the table, he had passed behind a dusty potted palm and melted away like a cloud of smoke in a heavy gale.

Marge started as she looked up and saw Marc standing beside her. "How did you get *there*?" she asked. Her hand, that had been stretched out toward a dark object lying opposite her, on the table, darted back guiltily. Marc glanced down and

recognized his own wallet.

"How did that get here?" he asked.

"You left it just now," Marge said confusedly. "I thought I'd better look after it while you were away."

Marc picked up the wallet and opened it. Two hundred dollars in bills were missing, but three hundred dollars and several checks remained. Obviously, George had lifted the wallet sometime during the night. But what could he possibly find to do with two hundred dollars in a place like Sunnyside Lodge? Marc couldn't imagine. The matter would have to wait until George decided to reappear again. Helping Toffee into a chair, Marc seated himself in the place that had been George's.

RESTING her elbows on the table, Toffee cupped her chin demurely in her hand and leveled an accusing gaze on Marge. "Having a little larceny for breakfast, dear?" she asked.

"Don't get smart," Marge mumbled. "I'm goin' straight."

"To where?"

"Say! I oughta chop you off at the pockets for a crack like that. You ain't no angel yourself. Why, if you ever showed up around headquarters in that dress you're wearin', they'd throw the book at you."

"Which book is that?" Toffee asked with genuine interest.

"Huh?" Marge said.

"The book they're going to throw at me. Which one is it?"

"Yeah, Marge," Pete put in from across the table. "Which book is that?"

"How should I know which book!" Marge cried with sudden confusion. "Any one that's handy, I suppose. I don't care if they throw the whole library at her. I wish they would."

"Now," Toffee said thoughtfully, "if this book was 'Forever Amber' . . ."

"Skip it!" Marge cried distractedly. "For the love of heaven, skip it, can't you? I'm sorry I brought it up."

"You should be," Toffee said sternly. "Besides, flinging books about seems to be a very loose way of upholding the law. I don't think you know what you're talking about."

Marge winced, completely demoralized. Across the table, Pete dug an affable elbow into Marc's ribs.



"You're plenty smart, Mr. Pillsworth," he said. "That business about the note is the nuts." He tapped his coat pocket. "It leaves Marge and me in the clear. Of course, I think the whole deal is kinda loopy, but if that's the way you want it . . . " He shrugged his beefy shoulders significantly.

For a moment Marc was completely mystified . . . but only for a moment. Plainly, Pete was confusing him with George. The best thing in that case, was probably just to string along with the gag and find out what was going on . . . what kind of a "deal" George had made.

"Let's see the note," he said, holding out his hand.

"What for?" Pete wanted to know. "You give it to me to keep."

"I want to make a correction," Marc said quickly.

A crafty look came into Pete's eyes. "Say, you ain't tryin' to back out, are you? You said I wasn't to let you, if you did. Remember?"

Things, Marc could see, were going to take a bit of doing. Perhaps a little firmness . . . "Give me that note," he ordered.

"In front of her?" Pete nodded toward Toffee. "You wouldn't want her to know about it. It'd shock her somethin' awful. You wanted this all secret."

Marc decided to drop the matter. Anything that would shock Toffee's rawhide sensitivities was better left in the dim regions of Pete's pocket . . . for the time being, anyway. Uneasy thoughts of blackmail coursed quietly through his mind.

Pushing her chair back, Marge got to her feet. "Come on, Pete," she said. Let's get outa here and get some fresh air."

"You ain't finished breakfast yet," Pete reminded her.

"All of a sudden I got a sour stomach." She glanced meaningfully at Toffee.

Together, the two of them left the table and moved across the dining room, to the door leading onto the veranda. Marc stared worriedly after them.

"Don't look so glum," Toffee said gently, reaching out to pat his hand.

"You still love me, you know, no matter what happens."

"I don't deserve you," Marc said sadly. "I've never been that mean."

It was then that he caught sight of the jug. It had begun to behave very strangely in the last few seconds. Surreptitiously, it was inching away from his chair like a footless pen-guin.

"So you're back, are you?" Marc said, addressing the ambling jug.

The jug came to a guilty halt. "Uh-huh," George's voice said quietly.

"What have you been up to behind my back? What's this deal with Pete?"

"Nothing . . . much."

"You sit down," Marc commanded irritably, "and materialize. I want to tell you what I think of you right to your treacherous face."

THE jug swooped over to the chair that Pete had just left and settled on the floor. The chair moved briefly out from the table, then back again. Slowly, George came into view, looking very sheepish. That no one besides Marc and Toffee seemed to notice this singular occurrence was probably due to the failing eyesight of the other guests of Sunnygarden Lodge.

Marc leveled a tense finger at George's nose. His lips parted angrily, but he didn't speak. An alien hand had suddenly closed over his own. He looked up to find the decrepit gypsy standing beside him. She was bent over his hand, staring at it myopically.

"You," she said in heavy, theatrical tones, "are destined to live a long and happy life. It is written in your hand."

Toffee looked on these proceedings with high disapproval. "You quit holding his hand, you old moll," she put in heatedly, "or your life won't be worth living."

The woman looked up in alarm. "Alright, dearie," she said, dropping Marc's hand. "No harm done." She tottered briskly away from the table.

Not to be deterred from this interruption, Marc leveled his finger back at George's nose. "Now, listen, you . . ." he began. But there he stopped.

A strange expression had come into George's face and he was beginning to look a little ill. He glanced uneasily around the room, then swallowed . . . hard. For a moment he looked like he was going to speak, but all of a sudden there was a

sharp popping sound, like a blown fuse, and he instantly vanished. In the same moment, the jug beside his chair began to tremble violently, then, astonishingly, leaped about a foot into the air, as though seized with a fit of anger. It lingered there, undecidedly suspended for a moment, then suddenly crashed to the floor, sending shattered crockery and liquid fanning out in a messy arc. Marc and Toffee stared at the wreckage as the little white-haired lady, who had found George's feet so fascinating, suddenly started from her chair.

"I can't stand it another minute!" she whimpered. "I must see! *I must!*" And whirling around to face Marc she stared at him wretchedly for an intensely silent moment. Then, with a quick movement, she reached quickly down beneath the table and started tugging at the legs of his trousers.

Marc was instantly on his feet. "Lady!" he yelped in surprise. "What a thing to do! Let go of my pants!"

"Yes," Toffee put in excitedly, rising from her chair. "You should have given up ideas like that long ago!"

The little woman hesitated in her activities, seeming to realize for the first time what she was doing. And, clearly, it shocked her even more than Marc or Toffee. With an agonized upward glance at Marc, she made an unintelligible sound, turned chalk white and slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

At this point the situation might have straightened itself out. It might have, that is, if the woman had only thought to release her hold on Marc's trouser legs. But she hadn't. Falling back, she dragged Marc's balance after her. Clawing the air in a sort of breast stroke, Marc crashed to the floor, and sprawled out full length.

At this, the woman's male companion, who had been watching these proceedings through a nearsighted haze, shot from his chair like an avenging angel. "He attacked my wife!" the little man screamed. "The fiend! I seen him! He attacked my old lady!"



Chapter 7

THE quiet atmosphere in the dining room suddenly gave way to riot. The patrons of the lodge were magically transformed into a league of formidable warriors . . . no longer the slowly disintegrating remnants that they had first appeared to be. Summoning hidden vigor, from heaven only knew what source, they rose as a body and swarmed toward the scene of the outrage. One of their number had been attacked and they plainly were not to be found wanting. Crutches, ear trumpets and miscellaneous silverware were instantly pressed into service in lieu of weapons. One old gentleman, racing his wheelchair at break-neck speed, hurled himself into the fray with all the proud spirit of a knight astride a charger. Other ancient enlistees, in their near-sightedness, promptly engaged each other in ferocious battle, no questions asked. Crockery flew in all directions and crashed unheeded against the walls. The orderly dining room was reduced to a raging ruin in only a matter of seconds.

At the first signs of hostilities, Toffee had jumped to Marc's defense. It was her thought that the whole thing could be prevented with a few pertinent words of explanation. But no soon-

er had she opened her mouth than the arm rest of a crutch caught her rudely under the chin and pinned her against the wall, silent and helpless. Her captor was a wild-eyed little lady in subdued lavender.

"Hussy!" the little woman screamed. "Runnin' around with fiends! You're just as bad as the company you keep. Don't you dast open your painted mouth to me!"

Somehow, Marc, by this time, had managed to stagger to his feet. Seeing Toffee's predicament, he started toward her, but was cut off by his howling tormentors. Wildly, he swung about in the opposite direction. Then he stopped short. For an instant his gaze had swept over the open door leading onto the veranda. Coming up the steps, and losing no time about it, were Julie and Dr. Polk.

Marc whirled back toward the door. "Julie!" he screamed.

Julie glanced frightenedly toward the scene of chaos. But Marc never saw her face, for at that same moment a warming dish, complete with heavy metal cover, came down thunderously over his head. Poached eggs were streaming into his eyes as he pitched toward the floor, but he wasn't aware of them. Everything had already gone pitch black.

The little lady in lavender started forward a bit as the crutch gave under her hand and jolted against the wall. She stared quizzically at the wall. Then, dropping the crutch, she removed her glasses and wiped them vigorously with a delicate lace handkerchief. Replacing the glasses carefully, she stared at the wall again.

"Well, I'll be blessed," she murmured. "I could have sworn I had that little harpy all the time."

Toffee had vanished into thin air.

A TINY bubble of awareness rose through the blackness of Marc's mind, reached the surface and exploded with a flash of light. It was immediately followed by another . . . then two . . . and three . . . and a score. Marc stirred and opened his eyes. His vision was pulsing and dim. Objects leaped into view, then disappeared. A chair, a table, a door, a window with the blind mostly drawn. His hands fell against softness and he knew he was lying on a bed. He rolled over. The motion must have had a clearing effect on his head, for the objects were suddenly more distinct and remained in focus longer. A seated figure swam into view very close by. For a

moment it hovered over him, then faded, vanished reappeared and remained. It was Dr. Polk.

The doctor's precise features arranged themselves into a sparse smile. "Well, my boy, he said, "How are you feeling?"

"I . . . I don't know," Marc faltered. "How did you find me here?"

"We gave the police the license number on your car as soon as you ran off yesterday," the doctor answered. "They didn't have much trouble locating you." He smiled sadly. "You've been a rather naughty boy. They tell me you've taken to beating old ladies."

"No," Marc murmured. "A mistake . . . it was a mistake."

"Yes, yes," the doctor patronized. "But we must face things as they really are, my boy. It's the only way out, you know. Something has upset you badly, but everything can be set right again if we can get to the root of the trouble. You must be pronounced well again, you know, if you're going to go to court against Mrs. Pillsworth. We'll have to re-establish your legal status."

"What!" Marc didn't know where the strength came from but he was suddenly sitting up. "Get out of here! I'll stay nutty the rest of my life if that's the way the wind is blowing." He fell back, exhausted, but he was beginning to feel better. Stronger, anyway.

"Now, you must be reasonable," the doctor went on, undisturbed. "You wouldn't want to be put away in an institution, would you?"

Marc shook his head. It was the truth; he wouldn't.

"Then you must help me to help you. First of all, I want you to go back in memory to your childhood, and tell me anything, everything that comes to mind. Just close your eyes and think back. Start with your earliest memory."

Marc glared at the doctor for a moment, then resignedly closed his eyes. There was a long period of silence. Finally, he said, "The first thing I remember is the night I was born."

"What!" the doctor's voice was excited.

"Yes. I recall that someone gave me a pair of soft blue booties."

"Yes, go on!"

"I used them," Marc said flatly, "to beat the doctor's brains out." He opened his eyes and boosted himself forward. "How's that for a memory?"

But the doctor wasn't listening. In fact, he wasn't even looking at Marc. Instead, his gaze was fastened in horrified wonder on the bureau across the the room. A shudder crept through his thin body, and he turned away, one slender hand pressed firmly to his eyes.

The reason for the doctor's distress was instantly apparent; Toffee had materialized. Seated pertly atop the bureau, one perfect leg crossed seductively over the other, she was truly a vision from another world. There was something statuesque and unnatural in her pose. But when Marc looked at her, she came momentarily to life. Quickly, she raised one tapering finger to her lips, then shook her head. That was all. Immediately, she resumed the mannikin pose and held it rigidly. Marc nodded and slumped back on the bed.

"Well, doc," he said brightly, "what do you think of my childhood?"

THE doctor drew his hand away from his eyes and stared at Marc stupidly. "Your childhood?" he asked bemusedly. "I . . . I . . . think . . ." He glanced quickly over his shoulder at the bureau and shuddered again. "Tell . . . tell me," he faltered. "What do you see on that bureau over there?"

With elaborate deliberation, Marc raised himself and squinted at the bureau. "A Gideon bible," he said pleasantly. "That's all I see."

The doctor's face turned ash grey. "Been working too hard," he muttered. "Got to . . . to . . . to take a rest." He turned misery-ridden eyes on Marc. "You'll have to excuse me. We will continue . . . later . . . maybe."

He got unsteadily to his feet and moved slowly toward the door. Reaching it, he stretched his hand toward the knob, then withdrew it. Clearly, the good doctor was struggling against some inner conflict. Suddenly, with a determined lift of his chin, he turned and gazed squarely at the bureau. It was a grave mistake.

It wasn't so much that Toffee met the doctor's gaze unblinkingly. The real damage was done when she smiled and winked at him. That was too much. With a cry of purest despair, the doctor pivoted, threw open the door and bolted into the hall. A second later his footsteps echoed on the stairs with machinegun rapidity.

Marc swung himself off the bed and impulsively crossed to Toffee and kissed her on the cheek. "You were wonderful," he said. "You certainly stewed his prunes."

Toffee leaned back and giggled. "You only say that," she murmured, "just because I'm gorgeous. I wonder if Julie ever found . . ."

"Julie!" Marc's eyes were panic-stricken.

Perhaps Julie was a bit high-tempered at times, but she was still his wife. It seemed, now, that she had been caught in a raging flood of madness and Julie was the rock of reality to which he must cling at all costs. Whirling away from Toffee, he raced toward the door.

When Marc reached the foyer of the lodge, he was surprised to find it completely deserted, except for the little manager. Astonishingly, at the sight of Marc, the fellow clasped his hands ecstatically before him and ran to meet him. "Oh, Mr. Pillsworth!" he cried. "You don't know what you've done! You just simply don't *know*! You've absolutely rejuvenated my guests with that little riot of yours. They all said they didn't know when they felt so young. They've all gone out in the woods for a picnic . . . with beer! They took up a collection for the damage in the dining room, and . . ."

Marc wasn't listening. "Where's my wife?" he asked. "Where's Julie?"

"The pretty blonde young lady?" the manager asked.

"Yes, yes. Where is she?"

"Out on the veranda, I believe. Down at the far end, around the corner. Poor dear, she was crying terribly when she went out."

Marc turned and darted for the door. Then he stopped abruptly. A large hand had fallen over his arm and was holding him back. He looked up to see Pete standing beside him.

"Let go," he said impatiently, "I've got to find my . . ."

"Never mind," Pete said. "You just come along with me. Let's get it over with, huh? Marge and me we want to get outa here."

"Get what over with? What are you talking about?"

"You know. Our deal."

"What deal? Say, what is this all about, anyway?"

"You know. The deal you said I wasn't to let you back out on. Remember?"

SUBSEQUENT development had completely banished the scene at the breakfast table from Marc's mind. "No. I don't remember any deal." He tried to pull away, but the big man held him firmly.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Pillsworth. Remember at breakfast when you told me how you come up here to commit suicide 'cause your wife is leavin' you? Only you didn't have the nerve? Remember how you gave me two C's to bump you off? And I wasn't to let you back out no matter what you said? And the note you give me, sayin' how you was knockin' yourself off over a busted heart, so's Marge and me, we'd be in the clear on doin' the job? Remember?"

"I've been frâmed," Marc said desperately, recalling the note he'd seen George give to Pete. "That was George you made the deal with. He wants me out of the way. You weren't talking to me. You were talking to George!"

Pete started to laugh. "That's pretty funny, Mr. Pillsworth!" he roared. "George, the talkin' dog, done it, eh? That's real good. I'll have to tell Marge." His hand moved close to Marc's side. It was holding a gun. "You paid me for a job, Mr. Pillsworth, and you got a job comin'. It wouldn't be honest otherwise. And I ain't goin' to let you talk me outa it, neither. Aren't you glad?" He gave the gun an extra shove. "I'd rather not do it right here. Let's go outside. Whaddaya say?"

As Pete shoved him gently but firmly toward the door, Marc peered frantically around the room. "George!" he called. "George! Oh, George, for the love of Mike!"

Behind him, Pete's laugh boomed out in a salvo of noisy mirth. "You're a card, Mr. Pillsworth!" he howled. "You sure are a card. When it comes time for me to cash in on my chips, I hope I'll have the nerve to crack jokes like that."

All the way up the trail to the brink of the cliff, Marc had continued to call vainly for George, and the joke, as far as Pete was concerned, was beginning to wear thin.

"Can't you stop that?" Pete asked. "It kinda gets on a guy's nerves after a while. If it means so much to you to have that dog around, why don't you just whistle?"

"I don't feel like whistling," Marc said irritably. "I mean George isn't a dog. He's . . . a . . ." He glanced over the edge of the cliff, and his legs suddenly turned to sawdust. Yards and yards of nothing at all stretched out endlessly downward. He

turned pleadingly to Pete. "Now, listen to reason, Pete. "I don't want to commit suicide. That was all a mistake . . ."

"You told me not to listen when you started talkin' like that," Pete said. "I gotta do the honest thing, Mr. Pillsworth. I gotta bump you off."

"Do you *have* to be so honest?" Marc asked desperately. "Don't you want to get ahead in your chosen profession? Haven't you any ambition at all? A good crook would automatically go back on his word, just as a matter of principle. Think of your future, Pete. Where's Marge? She'll tell you."

Pete shook his head. "Marge is takin' it easy back at the lodge. She says we're goin' straight, and I'm to do exactly as you said." He stepped back and motioned toward the edge of the cliff with his gun. "Now, why don't you save us both a lot of trouble and just step off that there cliff? That way, I won't have to shoot you off. I'm goin' to count three, and if you ain't jumped yet, I'll shoot."

"No, Petel" Marc cried. "No, you don't understand . . ."
"One."

Pete took a step forward and Marc edged back a little. He didn't look behind him. The edge of the cliff was only inches away.

"Two."

Pete advanced again, and Marc nervously sidled to the left. Then a look of hopelessness swept over his face. Closing his eyes, he turned and faced the cliff. Waiting for the final, fatal number, his body was tense as a steel spring.

PETE raised his gun level with Marc's back and opened his mouth, but neither the gun nor the mouth spoke. Julie, a piece of paper clutched tightly in her hand, had suddenly appeared on the clearing at the top of the cliff. At the first glimpse of Marc, poised on the edge of the cliff, she stopped short, her lovely tear-stained face twisted with horror. Then she closed her eyes and screamed with all her might.

As the noise stabbed through the mountain air, Marc started as though he had been kicked. Then, clutching his middle in a gesture of mortal pain, he teetered drunkenly on the brink a moment and . . . plunged downward.

Footsteps sounded on the trail, and Dr. Polk, breaking through the clearing, ran breathlessly toward Julie. Reaching her, he placed an inquiring hand on her arm. Julie instantly

opened her eyes, stared at the empty space where Marc had been and screamed again. She started to run forward, but the doctor caught her and held her back. She whirled angrily toward Pete.

"Why did you let him do it?" she screamed. "You just stood there!"

Slipping his gun into his pocket, Pete stared at her stupidly. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "Seems like he just wanted to do it."

With a gesture of hopelessness, Julie turned back to the doctor and buried her face in his shoulder. "It was all my fault," she sobbed. "I drove him to it. And he was sick, too!"

"Julie!"

The voice was from beyond the cliff. Also, it came from beyond the grave. There was a distant other-world quality about it.

"Marc!" Julie broke away from the doctor and ran swiftly to the edge of the cliff. Kneeling, she peered anxiously over the side. Not more than three yards below, spread eagle over the face of a sloping rock ledge, was Marc. He was clinging tenaciously to a small bush that had grown into the side of the cliff, and his feet were braced securely against the jagged protruding edge of the ledge. Though he could have probably remained there for days without any real danger, his upturned face was filled with undiluted terror.

"Julie," he cried weakly. "For the love of heaven, get me out of here. 'I've been shot.'"

After Dr. Polk and Pete, with the babbling moral support of Julie, had managed to haul Marc back over the edge of the cliff and convince him that he was not riddled with bullets, they left him lying on the ground. Julie knelt beside him and took him in her arms. Pete, after a hasty glance at his resurrected victim, hastily disappeared in the direction of the trail. Probably the apprentice gunman was worried lest Marc demand a refund of two hundred dollars on the grounds that his services had been incompletely rendered. Dr. Polk, apparently somewhat recovered from his disquieting encounter with Toffee, stood by, observing Marc with unashamed directness.

"It's all right," Julie cooed comfortingly. "Everything is going to be all right . . . even if you are crazy. I'll stick by you, darling. You'll have the loveliest padded cell that money can buy. I'll take care of you." She held him a little way out from

her. "You mustn't ever do anything like this again. When I found that note in your room, I nearly went mad myself."

"Could . . . could I see the note?" Marc asked weakly.

JULIE reached into her pocket and held up a crumpled piece of paper. Her hand had perspired and smeared the writing until it was completely illegible, but there was no doubt that the handwriting was Marc's . . . or an exact duplicate.

"But we don't want to see any more of that hateful thing," Julie said. She crushed the paper into a ball and hurled it over the edge of the cliff. "There, now, that's all over, that silly business about you killing yourself." She drew Marc closer to her.

Over Julie's shoulder, Marc glanced uneasily at the doctor. It seemed this was not quite the time for an observer. But the doctor was no longer interested in the reconciliation. Instead, his gaze was riveted on the trail. Marc's eyes automatically followed the doctor's, and the hair at the back of his neck began to bristle. Toffee, her filmy skirts held well above her knees, was running toward the clearing as fast as her decorative legs could carry her. Marc stiffened in Julie's arms.

"What is it, dear?" Julie asked.

"No . . . nothing," Marc said faintly. Toffee, by appearing just at this moment, could easily set matters back to where they were in the beginning. Something had to be done . . . quick! Marc's hand started forward in a gesture of warning, but in moving upward from the ground, it brushed lightly against a rock. And there it stopped.

As Marc's hand closed over the rock, his eyes clouded with pain. It was the only effective way to get rid of Toffee quickly. It had to be done. His hand moved upward, poised the rock squarely over his head, then quickly released it. Whack! It was a case of pinpoint bombing. Marc slumped in Julie's arms.

"Oh, dear," Julie murmured concernedly. "He's passed out again." She started to massage Marc's wrists. Then, noticing the trickle of blood over his left eyebrow, she added another, "Oh, dear!"

"Oh, Lord!" Dr. Polk breathed, and his voice was far more earnest than Julie's. Staring at the place where Toffee had been, he seemed almost in danger of bolting over the face

of the cliff in a fit of terror. "She's gone!" he cried. "She just melted into nothing!" Avoiding the spot where Toffee had last stood, he edged cautiously toward the trail, and reaching it, broke into a dead run toward the lodge. He ran like a man possessed.

Not conscious of the doctor's odd behavior, Julie gazed softly into Marc's unconscious face. "I'll take care of you," she whispered. And slowly she lowered her lips to his.



Chapter 8

BUT in the tranquil valley of his own mind, Marc was concerned with other lips . . . the very singular lips of Toffee. One arm still around his neck, Toffee leaned back and smiled.

"Another day," she sighed happily, "another dilemma. You do live such a rapturous life. Never a sane moment."

"It has never occurred to you," Marc said dryly, "that you contribute something to that insanity yourself?"

"Me?" Toffee asked wide-eyed. "How can you say a thing like that? I'm always the one who has to straighten everything out."

"I suppose you were on your way to straighten things out when you ran out on the cliff. If Julie had seen you she'd have tossed me over the brink again."

"I was on my way to save your wretched life," Toffee replied haughtily. "I cornered Marge back at the lodge and made her tell me the whole story. She thought you were already dead, but I knew you weren't. If I still existed, you did too. So I ran up there to stop Pete from killing you. Now I get blamed."

Marc took her hand in his. "You were wonderful," he

said sincerely.

"You bet I was," Toffee said self-righteously. "It was that fiend, George, that caused all the trouble."

Marc had almost forgotten the ghost in the excitement of the last half hour. "That demon! First I couldn't get rid of him, then when I wanted him, he wasn't anywhere."

"Of course not. George went back to . . . well, wherever he came from. Remember how he disappeared at the table?" Marc nodded. "Well, George did his swan song right there."

"What?"

"Sure. Because of that fortune teller," Toffee explained. "It was the simplest thing in the world. She said it was written in your hand that you would live a long time. Well, George believed her. And if you were going to live, he had to get going. That's the rules, and he's a stickler for the rules. And it's only natural that George believes in fortunetellers. He's very superstitious, you know. After all, he's a ghost himself, isn't he?"

"I see," Marc murmured wonderingly. "Then George is gone for good."

Toffee nodded and began to laugh. "You remember how that jug lurched about when George disappeared?"

"Uh-huh, What's so funny about that?"

"George," Toffee giggled in a fit of hilarity, "tried to take it with him."

Marc started to laugh too, then stopped. The earth was moving away from under him. Either that, or he was rising lightly in the air. Whichever it was, only he, himself, was affected by the phenomenon, for Toffee remained on the grassy knoll. He reached down toward her, but she only smiled up at him.

"It's all over," she called. "Goodbye. It's been lovely being with you again. Don't forget me."

Marc tried to force himself downward, but he couldn't. His will was too weak against the force that was lifting him. When he stopped trying, he shot upward all the faster. Moving away into the distance, he looked regretfully back at Toffee, a tiny waving figure, now, in the soft loveliness of the valley.

"Goodbye!" he called. "Goodbye!"

Then, looking up, he saw the darkness racing down to meet him. He felt a little sad at leaving Toffee and the valley, and yet it was comforting to know that in a few moments he

would be back in Julie's arms.

THE next morning the sun glinted brightly over the hood of the blue convertible, then flashed against its rear bumper as it left the graveled drive of Sunnyside Lodge and turned onto the pavement of the highway.

Behind the wheel, Marc, with an impressive-looking bandage over his left eye, glanced uneasily at Julie, who sat rigidly upright in the opposite corner of the seat. Marc wondered how he could reassure her. Probably the truth about Toffee and George would be worse than nothing at all when it came to restoring her confidence. Maybe just some nice, intelligent conversation . . .

"What . . . what happened to that nice fellow, Dr. Polk?" he asked rather stiffly.

"I really don't know," Julie said, careful that her gaze remained on the scenery along the road. "He left without a word early yesterday afternoon."

That took care of that. A heavy tide of silence washed between them and bore the conversational topic of Dr. Polk away, beyond recovery. Marc hummed self-consciously to himself for a moment, then, in desperation reached toward the car radio and switched it on. Presently, a sonorous voice broke dispiritedly through the silence.

" . . . in Europe," it said. "And now for the news, here at home. Probably the most provocative story of the day concerns the psychiatrist, Horace D. Polk. It seems that Dr. Polk, in a state of acute agitation, turned himself in for psychiatric treatment at his own clinic late last night. The doctor claims that overwork had caused him to be the victim of hallucinations that take the form of scantily clad women who suddenly appear, wink at him, and vanish into thin air. Before being taken into the care of one of his associates, the doctor told newsmen that his patients would be notified that any diagnosis pronounced by him within the last two months should probably be disregarded. He said that such people would be advised to place themselves in the hands of other, reliable doctors until his recovery. Dr. Grimes, a long-time friend and associate of Dr. Polk, stated that the clinic . . ."

Marc quickly turned off the radio, pressing his lips tightly together to hold back the mirth that was bubbling inside. He turned cautiously to Julie. She was looking at him now,

and the twinkle that always foreshadowed laughter was in her eyes. Then, she edged closer to him, and suddenly they both began to laugh in the same instant.

Marc's laughter rang out clear, unrestrained. Everything was all right again. He reached an arm around Julie and drew her closer. Yes, sir, everything was perfectly all right.

* * *

I*N A faraway time and space, on a drifting world of vagrant mists and shrouds, five strange figures had drawn together on what appeared to be a shapeless chunk of steam. Reclining in various attitudes of majestic ease, they seemed happily unaware that, by human standards, their physical contours left something to be desired. For reasons known only to themselves two of the party had seen fit to dispense entirely with the customary appendages, and were lounging in armless and legless splendor on their paunchy stomachs. Two others, even less ambitious, manifested only bulbous heads that terminated in trailing vapors. The fifth was merely a torso, or at least, a simulation of what the torso thought a torso should be.*

In the foreground, fidgeting guiltily, George stood before them, his head bowed in an attitude of abject contrition.

From one of the five . . . it would be difficult to say which under the circumstances . . . a low rumbling voice issued forth . . . Really more of a sound than a voice, it seemed to produce only guttural snorts rather than words. It appeared to be saying:

"Spectre, George Pillsworth, the Council finds cause for displeasure in your report. It is in fact, severely distressed over the whole matter. It would seem that you have gone to extravagant lengths to make us the laughing stock of all limbo."

George slowly raised his head. His eyes, the eyes of Marc Pillsworth, looked pained and darkly apprehensive.

"But, my lords," he pleaded, "what was I to do?"

"Do?" the voice thundered. "You were supposed to haunt the environs of your subject in a business-like and orderly manner, befitting an agent of the High Council. It seems that it was too much to ask. The only mortals that you frightened even a little were two office girls who quite rightly mistook you for nothing more than an unscrupulous employer displaying his lower impulses. You may as well know that the Council is considering an action that will remove any ectoplasm credits

permanently . . .

"No!" George cried. "It wasn't my fault . . . after all, the deceased refused to yield. These mortals can be unreasonable creatures when . . ."

There ensued a short series of rumblings as various anatomical fragments made brief appearances on the steam beds, then as quickly vanished. After an abrupt silence the ominous clearing of a throat sounded from a source impossible to ascertain.

"Mmm. Yes . . . There ARE extenuating circumstances . . . for which you may consider yourself fortunate, and hummmph, from which we may still be able to salvage some slight measure of respect from our allied departments. Perhaps the blame can be laid at the door of the bookkeeping section, if you . . ."

A tiny gleam of hope crept timidly into George's eyes as he nodded in vigorous assent. "I have my release," he offered eagerly, "signed by the section head."

"But!" the voice resumed, "that does not explain your irresponsible conduct, or the disgraceful affinity you displayed for alcoholic beverages!"

George's head slumped dejectedly to his chest again, and he stared into the bottomless regions beneath him. Then he started visibly as he noticed that the gaseous substance upon which he was standing was no longer secure beneath his feet. Already, it had grown thin and unsubstantial and he was beginning to sink downward till his legs were obscured almost to the knees. It was apparent that his worst fears were being realized and he was being sent into—

"Wait! My lords! I admit my conduct was contrary to all the fine traditions of haunting . . . but I'll never touch a drop again . . . not for a thousand years!"

George's voice echoed away, and his feet stopped slipping. With another series of low rumblings, the voice spoke again:

"The Council is inclined to accept the penance you have imposed on yourself. There is the proviso, however, that the other departments must receive no inkling of this scandalous affair. Agreed!"

George's head bobbed up and down in such energetic agreement that it seemed almost in danger of becoming dislodged from his neck.

There was an abrupt sound. A loud clap that may have

been thunder. The steam beds expanded, billowed outward, then faded away. From somewhere, it seemed a long way off, a voice was heard to say "Council dismissed!"

And George, finding himself alone, dissolved his ectoplasm and sat down with a troubled sigh. Absently, he scooped a handful of steam cloud from the small embankment and tossed it lightly out, into space.

He would need a long time to ponder the narrow escape he had just had. Then, too, the fact that Marc Pillsworth, through his unreasonable obstinance, had nearly wrecked his career, was not a matter to be dropped without serious consideration. And beyond that there was also that shrewish little creature who called herself Toffee. Toffee. Yes, a singular creature indeed. He wondered what department she worked under. To be sure, she was a nasty tempered little package, but her legs were nice, and her figure . . . He wondered, musingly if someday they might meet again . . .

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